AHEADシリーズ

終わりのクロニクル 3【下】

著●川上稔
イラスト●さとやす(TENKY)

電撃文庫

終わりのクロニクル

著●川上 稔　イラスト●さとやす（TENKY）

3
【下】

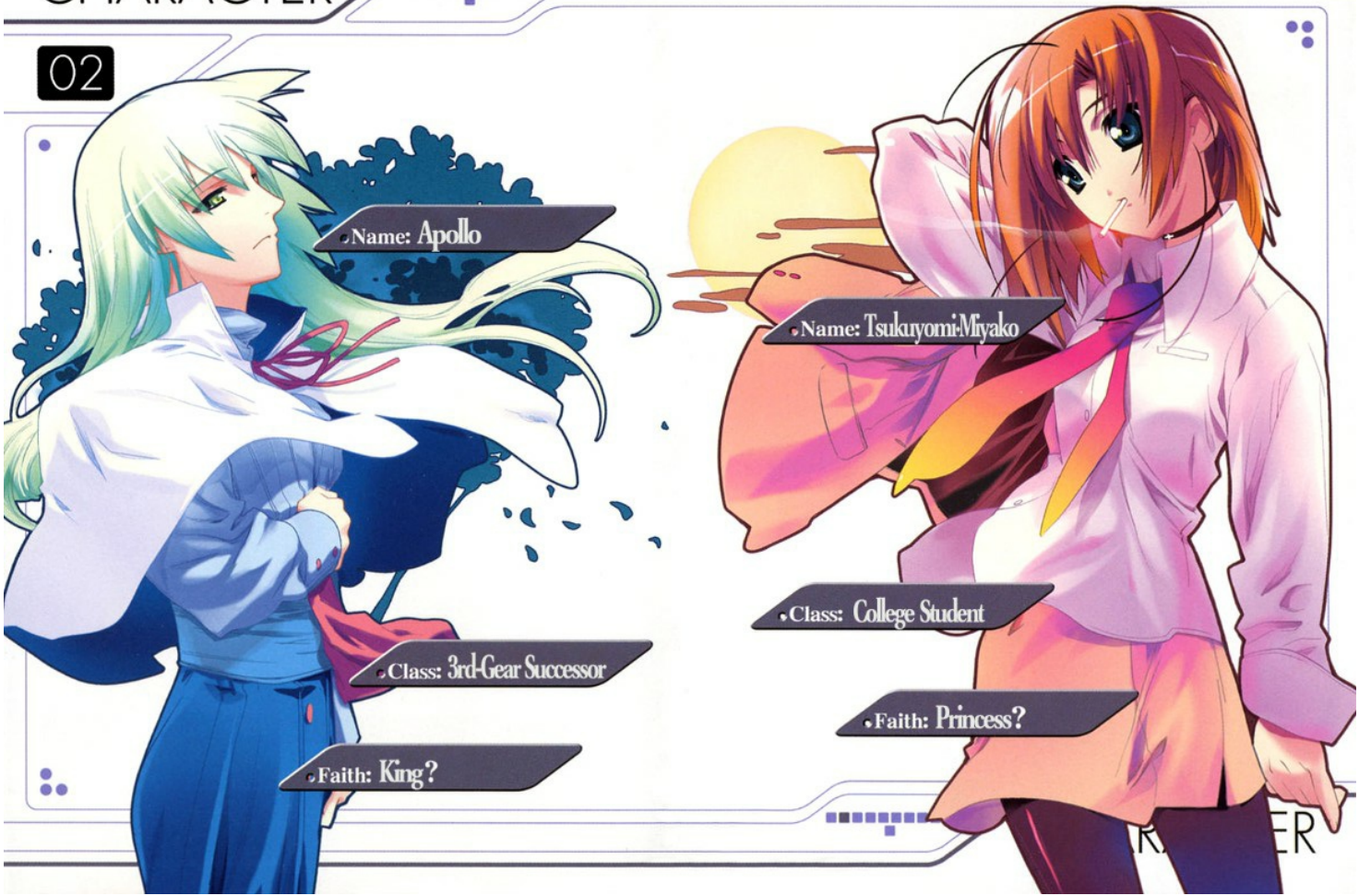
—Everyone,
It is time to gather.
In a place of intent.

The Ending Chronicle

Act.03

CHARACTER

02

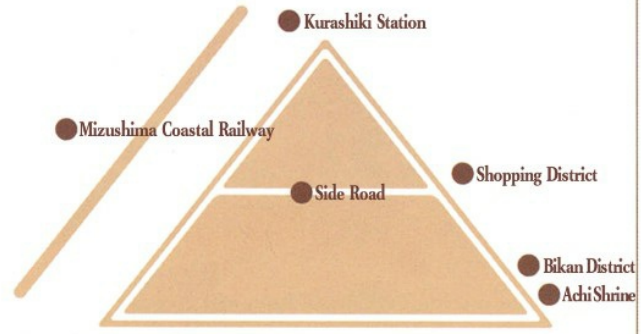


3rd-Gear's base is thought to be located within Kurashiki.
They once clashed with 1st-Gear in the Chugoku region,
but they moved their base afterwards.
As such, the concept space they use to hide has yet to be found.

Name: Kazami·Chisato

·About Kurashiki·

Kurashiki is a city within Okayama Prefecture's Kojima Peninsula.
The city has been shaped by its long history and the
central Kurashiki station and main roads
divide it up as seen in the diagram below.



Name: Baku

#002

HGUCAT NEWKIT REVIEW: SINJO SADAGIRI ver.Sa KASHIMA NATU

SINJO-

An early review of HGUCAT´s Ver. Sa!

H Grade Shinjou Sadagiri Ver. Sa - Seller/Japanese UCAT, Sayama Mikoto - 1:8 Scale

FIRST REVIEW

"Oh, Sayama-kun. I see you bought a plastic model. Did the model spirit begin to burn in your heart? Let me see, let me see."

"Oh, wow! …Wait. What kind of adult figure is this!? Why was I made into a kit!?"

"Ha ha ha. Such high blood pressure, Shinjou-kun. I was able to borrow Kashima's mold workshop, so I set it to run based on my personal data. As you are the copyright holder, I have one for you as well."

"Oh, thanks. ….No, wait! What does this HG stand for!? H Grade!?"

"If you know the answer, why are you asking? By the way, it is so well made that the armor can be removed even at 1:8 scale I hope to eventually make a 1:6 EG that can be completely stripped. EG stands for Eroundic Grade."

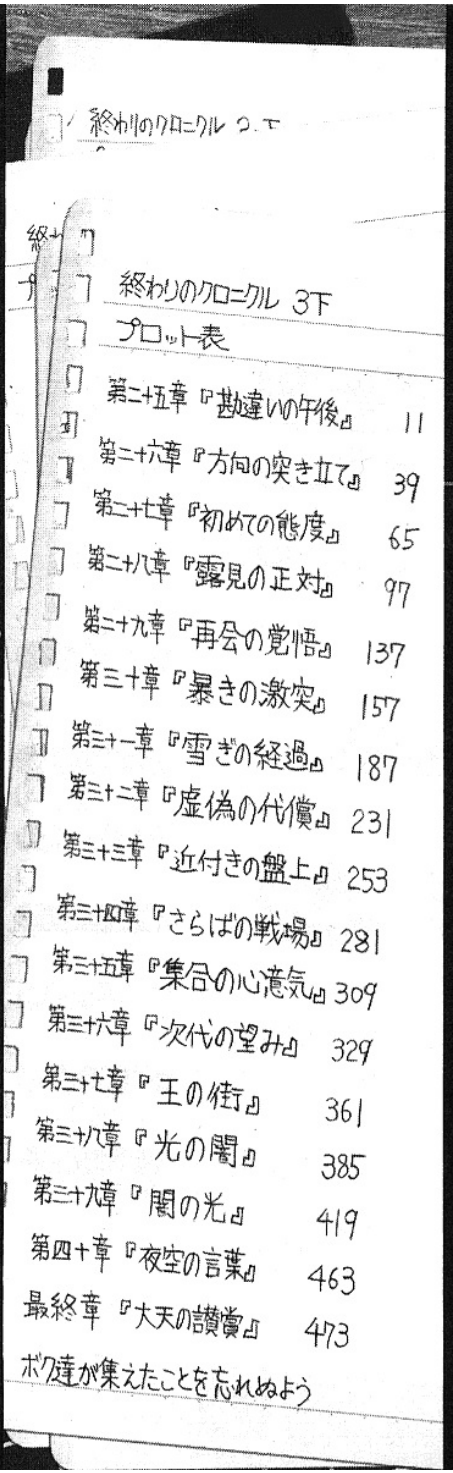
"I've heard enough. And what is Kashima-san spending all his time doing? …Wait! He's already made his wife!?"

HGUCAT001
H Grade Kashima Natsu
- Seller / Japanese UCAT
- 1:8 Scale
- Production limited to dev.

"Ah! I'm surrounded by criminals. A-and what's this putty and file set you have here?"

"That is of course to modify this spare kit into a Setsu-kun version. If it turns out well, I can use it to create a variation on the kit."

"You don't need to do that!! No adding anything on or filing anything down!!"



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ボク達が集えたことを忘れぬよう

イラスト：さとやす（TENKY）
カバーデザイン：渡辺宏一（2725inc）
本文デザイン：TENKY

03

・現状における佐山中心人物相関図・

家族関係

田宮家
実家代わり

佐山の両親
既に他界

?
佐山・薫
養父

元護国課

ジークフリート
図書館司書

アブラム
実働部部長

大城・宏昌
技術者

飛場・竜徹
道場主

佐山・御言

学校・生徒会関係

大樹先生
担当・顧問

出雲・覚
会長

風見・千里
会計

3rd-G

月読・京
月読の娘

モイラ姉妹
自動人形侍女

アポルオン
3rdの主人

ヘカトンケイル
戦闘型自動人形

1st-G

新庄・運／切
不断の存在

ブレンヒルト
美術部部長

2nd-G

鹿島・昭緒
2nd-Gの軍神

月読・史弦
開発部部長

3rdを追う者

飛場・竜司
ややエロ

美影
自動人形?

UCAT関係

大城・至
監督

Sf
至の侍女

シビュレ
整備役

ボルドマン
連携役

大城・一夫
困った老人

ディアナ
独逸UCAT

Chapter 25

“Afternoon of Misunderstanding”

It is naïve to think that something is obtained by facing each other
What matters is heading out to obtain it

●

On the afternoon beach, two boys faced each other with wooden swords in hand.

With the ocean in the background, the short one on the right ran forward and the large one on the left received him.

Hiba and Izumo were holding a mock battle.

The UCAT members watched them from the shade of the trees leading to the beach.

Amid them, a girl sat alone on the beach, watching Hiba's movements.

It was Mikage.

As she watched, Hiba was wary of Izumo's lowered sword yet moved swift and low.

She had predicted this action.

While joined with Susamikado, Hiba would always do that. It was a pattern he specialized in.

By lowering his body and moving quickly, he would sink below his opponent's field of vision. Even if his opponent caught sight of him again, his lowered body would hide the movements of his arms and legs.

…He's faster with Susamikado's wings.

She knew Hiba would win. She had almost never seen anyone but Hiba fight, but he had never once lost to the gods of war that came to kill her.

Also, he had learned a lot of techniques from his grandfather who lived in Okutama.

She did not know how his grandfather had destroyed 3rd-Gear.

He had used Susamikado, but she did not know how the god of war had been summoned. Despite having an automaton body, she had been a child too young to recognize her parents' faces at the time.

…Susamikado.

That power had been left to her along with the destructive weapon named Keravnos.

Just like her, the god of war had been rolled out with some defects remaining. Cronus may not have finished in time or Zeus may have caught on and hurried him, but it was an incomplete

product.

The first time she recalled summoning it was when a 3rd-Gear god of war had suddenly appeared and Hiba had been injured.

Her evolution had stopped on that night.

Hiba said she might need 3rd-Gear's concept core to evolve.

…So what am I doing here?

As she watched, Hiba charged up to Izumo.

The surrounding people cried out, but she held her impaired legs in her arms and mouthed some words.

"What am I doing?"

…All I do is rely on Ryuuji-kun.

Right now, he was not fighting for her evolution. She understood he had his own life, so she felt bad for feeling disappointed. It felt like she was restraining him and she did not like it.

…This is my problem, not his.

As she added that comment in her heart, she heard more voices.

Izumo had reacted to Hiba.

He made the first attack, but he did not use the lowered sword.

"!"

He kicked with his right leg while standing on his left leg which he had moved forward.

The shovel-like kick slammed into Hiba from below as he ran forward.

Mikage heard the sound of impact and a comment from Kazami next to her.

"Good."

Hiba was knocked off the ground.

●

Kazami clenched both her fists and watched Izumo.

He had lured Hiba in with the lowered sword and countered with the leg kept farther back.

…It was a simple feint, but that method was pretty mean.

He had held the sword in a special way to draw the eye and hide that the first attack would be a kick. The method worked best against an opponent with the combat experience to instantly decide what to do.

Izumo's kick struck Hiba and sent his small form into the air.

He then pressed the kicking foot forward and pushed the boy back.

Or he tried to.

"Tch."

He clicked his tongue and withdrew his leg.

Wondering what had happened, Kazami looked more carefully and noticed that Hiba's elbows were bent downwards as he doubled over in midair.

He had held the sword in his mouth and used both upper arms and palms to guard against Izumo's leg. She also realized why he had held his hands forward.

"Did he try to grab the ankle?"

Kazami's question was eloquently answered by how Izumo quickly drew back his leg.

In his instant in midair, Hiba removed the sword from his mouth and held it in his right hand. He shrank down and landed in an even further lowered posture. He used the tip of the sword to support himself when he almost fell.

"…!"

Despite being so close he could reach out and touch Izumo, he still accelerated.

However, Kazami saw Izumo step back by drawing his leg back even further than necessary. As tall as he was, a single step took him a long way.

Hiba's acceleration and Izumo's step back put approximately a meter between them.

When Izumo's right foot reached the sand, he rotated the toes to the left and dug into the sand.

"Take this!"

The wooden sword lowered from his right hand shot upwards and toward Hiba's side as he charged in.

Just as Kazami thought it was sure to hit, Hiba made a sudden move while running.

He stabbed his sword into the ground.

The sword in the sand acted as a powerful brake.

Sand burst into the air and he came to a sudden stop while just far enough away for Izumo's sword to brush by his bangs.

He had evaded the strike and he continued as if a switch had been

thrown.

He let out a cry and pulled the sword from the ground as he stood up.

With a swing from the right, it struck Izumo in the side.

“Kaku!”

Her shout was accompanied by an intense sound of impact.

Hiba’s sword was knocked from his grasp and Izumo’s body began moving a bit to the left.

But Kazami saw Hiba turn from left to right and throw a left hook from the opposite direction.

With the sound of the punch, Izumo’s large body stopped moving to the left.

However, Hiba did not stop there.

As soon as his leftward turning body returned to its original position, he reached his right hand into the air.

The sword knocked from his hand was there.

Kazami knew a wooden sword was not enough to damage Izumo. With his divine protection, a small blow from the tip of the sword would only give him the same amount of pain as being struck by a whip.

A thick blow that could reach the core of his body was needed and Hiba provided one.

As the sword rotated through the air, he grabbed the tip.

He swung it like a bat and struck Izumo with the thick, round hilt.

The hammer-like blow targeted the same spot as the first one.

It hit.

“!”

An unpleasant noise filled the air and Izumo collapsed forward.

But Hiba did not stop moving.

As soon as he finished the leftward swing, he was already leaning to the right.

He released the tip of the sword and knocked it away with his fingers.

While swinging his body to the right, he grabbed the sword again, but by the hilt this time.

However, he held it backwards as if to strike with the back of the sword. Meanwhile, Izumo’s body was bending forward toward him.

Kazami caught on to Hiba's tactic when she saw those two actions.

…That's what he's after, isn't it!?

Hiba targeted Izumo's jaw with the wooden sword. By striking below the jaw as if pulling it toward him, Izumo's head would swing upwards and the principle of leverage would shake his brain enough to cause a concussion.

The best way of striking the jaw like that was hold the back of the sword forward and strike with the curve.

The spectators, Kazami included, had seen plenty of Hiba's attacks and movements.

He had conveyed just how skilled he was.

If he landed this strike and knocked Izumo out, it would all be perfect.

Hiba had never intended for the bat-like swing to finish this.

That had been for show while he aimed for a complete victory by knocking Izumo unconscious.

Now that Izumo's jaw was in range, the real battle had begun.

Hiba took action and swung the horizontal strike toward Izumo's jaw.

When it hit, it sounded more like something breaking than merely being struck.

●

After swinging the wooden sword, Hiba looked at the scene before his eyes.

The hilt remained in his hands, but the wooden blade vanished partway up.

No, it had been broken.

Did I swing too hard? he wondered. *Should I have held back a little when striking the jaw?*

But he saw something beyond the scattering splinters of wood.

Something else had fallen into the position Izumo's jaw should have been in.

Namely, Izumo's forehead.

"Eh?"

What had happened?

The answer was simple. Izumo had taken the blow on his

forehead rather than the jaw and the counter had been forceful enough to break the wooden sword.

…Impossible.

The pain from the previous attack should have left him completely defenseless as he collapsed forward.

His breathing should have stopped, the pain should have been intense, and it should have been unbearable.

However…

"Damn, that hurt," muttered Izumo beyond the flying splinters.

A moment later, Hiba realized something heavy had landed on his right shoulder.

It was Izumo's hand after letting go of his sword and it had only reached because the larger boy's body had bent forward.

…He didn't fall forward out of pain! It was to grab me!

He gasped and Izumo rose up while breathing a larger breath.

Izumo faced Hiba with a sleepy look and then turned left to the spectators.

"Hey, did you see Hiba's skill? That looked like everything he had to me."

"I did and he was definitely going all out."

Izumo nodded toward Kazami's exasperated voice.

"I see," he said. "Okay. Watch this, Chisato. I'll be a good upperclassman and go easy on him."

He then faced Hiba.

"Hiba, how many times did you hit me? Three, right?"

Before Hiba could say it was four, the first strike hit him in the solar plexus.

That first strike came from the bottom of the sword he was holding.

It felt like having a stake driven in below his lungs, but he lessened the damage by moving backwards.

I'm fine, he told himself. *I've been in this same situation with the god of war, but I always managed to keep moving and defeat my opponent. I just have to do the same.*

"Kah…"

But for some reason, he could not move. Air left his mouth and his body remained motionless.

Why? he asked himself.

This was a normal strike and the same situation had happened in battles again gods of war. An opponent with especially thick armor would sometimes deflect his weapon and manage to get in close.

“Why are you just taking the blow? Are you stupid?”

At the point when he would have fallen back against a god of war opponent, Izumo’s second strike arrived.

The attack itself was simple. He merely formed a fist with the hand that had been on Hiba’s shoulder and swung it down.

However, Hiba’s movements were sluggish as he bent forward to escape backwards, so he took the full blow on his back.

The attacks to his gut and back had knocked all the air from his lungs.

His mind told him to evade, but he had been unable to move since the first strike.

He was utterly confused because he normally took this level of damage without issue.

“C’mon, pull yourself together, underclassman.”

Izumo grabbed Hiba’s shoulder to stand him up and oxygen quickly entered his straightened body.

“My attacks here are perfectly normal. Do you know why they’re so effective? Here’s the final one.”

Izumo stepped forward and performed a smash on Hiba’s right side.

The sound of impact reverberated dully throughout Hiba’s body and he felt his entire body vibrate.

He felt numb and Izumo’s voice arrived from beyond the shaking.

“You’re strong. Since I came to this Gear from the 10th reservation, the only person I’ve seen move as fast as you is the old janitor named Tanaka who’s my peeping partner. But you know what? You don’t know how to use that speed. Even when fighting gods of war, they’ve all been remotely controlled by automatons. You might’ve even gotten predictable in your attacks.”

Izumo’s hand pushed down on Hiba’s shoulder as he began to collapse.

“And you know what else? You hold back from possibly deadly attacks too much. You didn’t know that we fight for real in these fun training matches of ours, so you held back when you heard this was training. That’s why you only started rotating around a lot more

partway through, isn't it? If you'd done that from the beginning, you might've been able to get behind me. …Anyway, here's a fourth one for free."

Izumo used his other hand to strike just below the navel.

"…!"

Strength left Hiba's knees and he belatedly realized he was in real trouble.

"Well, Hiba? Strong, ain't I?"

He wanted to say that "sturdy" was a better word, but his jaw trembled and would not move.

"Okay, I paid you back and even gave a bonus strike, so now it's my turn."

"Eh?"

"Do your best, Hiba. And do your best, me. The people of the world are waiting. …Ready, go!"

A blow suddenly struck him in the gut.

"Okay, listen up, Hiba. You're about to lose."

He was struck in the chest and then was pulled forward by the collar.

"But I won't be the one that decides that. It'll be the others here. After seeing my restrained attacks turn you into an old rag or some scraps or something too pathetic to call a man, they'll vote on who won and who lost. You can't argue against that."

Another heavy blow struck his gut.

"So I won't do anything that would knock you out. I want you to truly experience this defeat as you collapse in front of everyone and fall into a sea of 'no, don't look at me!' embarrassment. I'll even give a nice laugh to enhance the experience. …Last one!"

Hiba could not move, but he still tried to take a defense stance. As if clinging to the idea that his spirit had not been broken, he was determined to stay focused to the very end.

But this attack was different from before.

Izumo slowly reached out his hand and used his index finger to poke Hiba's chest.

"At dinner, I'll tell you one of the reasons you lost. You can sleep until then."

That was all.

Hiba let out a breath and felt the world rise up below his feet.

It took a few seconds for him to realize he was falling.

His body had reached a limit separate from his spirit.

"…"

He did not feel himself land on the sand, but he did hear it happen.

He heard cheers from the rocky area and saw the spectators stand up.

But he also saw an expressionless and unmoving girl among those standing and walking over.

It was Mikage.

Amid all the movement and voices, the two of them remained motionless and said nothing.

He then averted his gaze and looked up into the sky. That sky contained a piercing blue he felt he had never seen before.

"Damn…"

His body weakly trembled as he spoke.

"I'm pathetic…"

●

The sun had reached its noontime height.

The shadows were at their smallest and the temperature in the building-filled city rose sharply.

Few people were out and walking along the black and scorching asphalt. It was only those unaccustomed to the city, those who had to move around for their job, and tourists.

Two people who fit all three categories were headed toward the small mountain in the city.

It was Sayama and Shinjou. They had both loosened their collars while approaching the tree-covered mountain. Baku began panting, so Sayama placed him on his shoulder to expose him to the wind. Sayama also flipped through some documents while walking.

"We should arrive at the entrance to the Achi Shrine soon. This is the only mountain on Kurashiki's east side."

Shinjou nodded while walking quickly across a narrow road lined with houses.

They were on their way to the Shinto shrine atop the small mountain. Only two places in Kurashiki contained a large number of natural trees. Mt. Tsurugata on the east side of the city was one of

them. The other was Mukouyama Park on the southeastern end, but it was far enough away that they had not considered going there today.

The Achi Shrine was only a few minutes' walk northeast of the Bikan district and circling the mountain northward brought one closer to the train station.

Sayama had suggested the following when leaving the Bikan district:

"According to the old man, UCAT thinks 3rd-Gear's base is somewhere near Kurashiki, so how about we view the city from the Achi Shrine and think about where their base might be?"

They had then begun walking, but it had quickly grown much hotter after leaving the teahouse.

Shinjou felt the heat below her feet as she and Sayama turned left at a corner. A sign had said the road led to the Achi Shrine, but it was so narrow she had her doubts.

"Ah."

There it was.

At the top of a cement slope was a torii with a white wall to the left and a tree-covered slope to the right. The torii was not red like the one she had seen at the Hikawa Shrine in Okutama. It was old and made from manmade stone.

Stone steps followed after the torii.

"These steps are pretty steep."

"Oh? Are you out of breath already, Shinjou-kun? There is a railing if you need it."

If she did nothing, he could very well suggest having her ride on his shoulders and actually go through with it, so she silently began running up the stone steps. They seemed to have been repaired recently because spots of white cement were visible here and there.

Her sandals rang loudly on the steps as she climbed them and she turned around upon reaching the halfway point. She found Sayama reading the documents while leisurely following two steps at a time.

Once he caught up, she let out a breath and started to sweat as if she had been holding it in. A sort of sweat not gained during training poured from her back and legs, but it was not a bad feeling.

"There is some shade here," she said after looking around.

The shadows of the trees reaching across from the right grew

deeper the farther they climbed the stairs.

She noticed Sayama was not out of breath and he had looked away from the documents at some point. He was instead looking toward the city behind them.

Shinjou did the same and saw something unexpected.

“You can see the sky.”

Their viewpoint had risen quite a bit without her realizing it.

The city was down below. They had risen above the houses, so they could see far across Kurashiki.

“Look how flat it seems from here, Shinjou-kun.”

He pointed south while focusing on the gathering of green far beyond the cityscape.

“South of Kurashiki and approximately four kilometers from here, the Yoshioka River runs east to west and a low mountainous area lies south of that. That mountainous area is visible from here with nothing obstructing the view. Also, the city retains its old form and the roads run in small curves. Do you understand what that means?”

“Um, well…”

“It is a vast flat area of land. If you look at it as a battlefield, it is convenient for weapons able to leap over buildings and use the roads as wide paths. Such a weapon could use the buildings as cover and leap over them if someone else tried to do the same. A god of war would be the perfect size for that.”

“Oh, I get it. But the girl I met earlier said the roads here are narrow.”

“Girl? What girl?”

“Oh, right. I didn’t tell you about that,” began Shinjou.

She went on to tell him about the girl she had bumped into in front of the convenience store and added that the girl had been from Tokyo.

“You certainly have become extroverted.” Sayama smiled toward her. “Do you want to try your hand at negotiation next time?”

“I-I can’t. I’m not good at sophistry.”

“What I do is not sophistry. It is- Well, we can discuss that later. What was this girl’s name?”

“Toda. Toda Mikoku. My heart skipped a beat when I heard her name. I was surprised to find someone else with a name like ours.”

She then turned toward Sayama and noticed something odd.

Sayama was clutching his chest with his right hand which held the documents.

He was experiencing chest pain.

●

Shinjou could tell that Sayama's face had grown pale and that he was sweating.

"S-Sayama-kun? Are you okay?"

"Y-yes. I was just regulating my breathing. I am fine, Shinjou-kun."

"Why? Why did you suddenly get chest pains? I wasn't talking about the past, was I?"

I'm trying to divert the blame away from me, she realized as she saw Sayama nod.

"What you said reminded me of someone I know. That is all."

"What I said? You mean the girl named Toda?"

She asked hesitantly, but nothing changed as he nodded.

She did not know who the Toda he was reminded of was.

…I wonder if he would tell me.

But before she finished thinking, he said something that could be taken as an answer.

"Anyway, if we fight in Kurashiki, Kazami would likely be our strongest member. If we fight on a straight-line battlefield, we can use Izumo's rushing strength. Perhaps we could use them as a commando unit while the special and standard divisions advance more slowly in a defensive formation."

This was not the topic Shinjou had been hoping to discuss, so she gave a mental sigh.

…He probably still isn't going to tell me about his past.

Of course, she had another thought as well.

…And I don't know my own past.

That thought was immediately followed by Sayama's voice.

"I apologize, Shinjou-kun. Even as I view myself as wonderful to an unparalleled degree, there are parts of myself I find troublesome."

"Eh?"

As she answered with a questioning syllable, he took her right hand. He walked up the stairs one step at a time and his light tug

sent her slowly after him. Once she caught up, he continued.

"To be honest, an oppressive feeling came over me as we passed through the early morning Osaka sky on the way here. I did not get a good look when we fought 1st-Gear because it was night and because I was distracted by you and the giant tower I saw on the way, but it was painfully obvious in the morning light."

He took a breath.

"The effects of the Great Kansai Earthquake are unmistakable."

"Yes," agreed Shinjou as she climbed the stairs.

That large-scale earthquake had occurred ten years ago which was within the time she had no memories of.

She had seen its effects on the helicopter ride to Okayama.

It had first been noticed by Kazami who had sat behind them. Shinjou had been giving comments such as "wow" or "amazing" as she watched the scenery down below, but then she had heard Kazami speak.

"It looks like claw marks."

When searching for what the girl had meant, Shinjou had noticed it.

Large faults and cracks that looked like claw marks had run across the land around Osaka.

The Great Kansai Earthquake was a large earthquake with its epicenter in southeast Osaka that had occurred in the early morning of December 25, 1995. Osaka, known as the sloped city, and the surrounding area had collapsed and some portions had been damaged beyond repair.

In those unrepairable areas, large faults had formed in the crust. For fear of secondary damages from landslides and cracks, the areas where the ground had shifted were deemed unlivable. Water, electricity, gas, and the other veins of civilization had all been cut off.

The part of Kansai's recovery to take the longest had been the construction of new relay facilities to make up for those disconnected veins. To make use of the land, Kansai contained a lot of densely-populated residential areas and even more facilities had been needed to circumvent the faults. However, a delay in the construction would have extended the time until central Kansai was able to function again and that could have even caused serious

damage to Japan as a whole.

To speed it all up, a floating island had temporarily been constructed in Osaka Bay. That and the quickly-repaired Kansai International Airport had been used as bases to store and transport various types of fuel and construction materials. The ocean and waterways had been used for ships to carry generator trucks and water supply trucks and to construct a communication network centered on cell phones and wireless internet.

The elevated highway running through the center of Osaka had been quickly reconstructed, but it had not connected to anything else and had been used by transport planes loaded with construction materials and supplies. While some remained unhappy that the one-every-forty-minutes high-speed transport planes were also carrying unnecessary things, the demolition and reconstruction work had spread from the center of the city.

Kazami had then spoken as if she had suddenly remembered it.

“The IAI headquarters in Shimane took the leading role. Someone said it was as if IAI were using the Kansai disaster area to test its technology. There are a lot of facilities with names left over from that time.”

She had then looked at the others in the cramped helicopter.

Shinjou had done the same and seen Sayama looking out the opposite window from the seat next to her.

In the very back seat, Hiba had been looking down from the window while holding Mikage’s shoulders as she slept.

The boy who now pulled on her hand up the stairs had lost his father in the secondary damages of that earthquake.

“That earthquake was apparently caused by the activation of the negative concepts by the Low-Gear Concept Core in the Tower of Babel that you saw, right?”

“That is a fair assumption.”

She tilted her head at that.

“Do you think it wasn’t?”

“Normally, only a change in the crust could cause such a wide-reaching earthquake. If it was caused by something else, various signs point toward it being the activation of the negative concepts and I think that is likely the truth.” He took a breath as he stepped up onto the top step. “But there is still a lot we do not know. If we

investigate it, I am sure we will find the answer."

He took another breath and looked around.

They were halfway up the stairs to the shrine. They turned right at the landing that sat in the shade of the trees and found a parking lot for the cars that had driven up here. The rest of the stairs were to the left of the parking lot.

As they walked toward those stairs, Sayama asked a question.

"Why does the Great Kansai Earthquake bother you that much?"

"Well, that seems to be a big reason why you clutch your chest and it's also the same time I lost my memories. It makes me wonder if…"

She trailed off as she felt her pulse throb.

●

"…?"

A heavy throb of unease came from deep in her chest, but she did not know why.

…What?

She could describe the feeling as "unpleasant" and it slowed her feet. Sayama gave a glance of concern next to her, so she grew frantic. She told herself the trembling feeling was just her imagination and she spoke further.

"Oh, um… As I was saying, it makes me wonder if my parents were also at the scene of the Great Kansai Earthquake."

Once she said it, she realized this was something she had not thought before. She had been given plenty of opportunities to think it, but she had been intentionally avoiding it.

…My parents…

"They might have been in Osaka and, just like your father, they might have…"

She could not continue.

This thought she had been avoiding for so long had arrived as a premonition after seeing the scars of the earthquake that morning and hearing what Sayama had said.

…Are my parents…already gone? Why have I never considered it before? Was I trying not to consider it?

She was a part of UCAT, so the odds were good that her parents had been as well. If they had been, they would have faced that

earthquake ten years before.

"!"

No, she thought with a trembling in her spine.

Her entire body shook and she had trouble breathing.

She further mentally rejected the idea and attempted to quell the trembling, but she could not.

Her thoughts were not enough to reject that horrible premonition.

Just as she realized she had to control the shaking, all strength except for that shaking left her.

Even so, she tried to speak and tell Sayama that she was fine.

"Hyah…"

Tears suddenly spilled from her eyes, her knees shook, her feet would not continue forward, and she wanted to crouch down on the spot.

"Shinjou-kun."

Sayama suddenly wrapped his arms around her.

"…!"

He embraced her with the forceful sound of an impact.

After she breathed a sigh of relief at being supported, his hand wrapped around behind her head and pressed her cheek against his chest. His body was warm to the touch and thick tears leaked down her cheeks.

She took a few breaths as if about to vomit.

"That would mean…I'm all alone. I don't want to be alone."

"That is not the case."

"Eh?" she said while looking up.

He brought his lips to hers.

"Nn…"

She half resisted in surprise and half relaxed as she entrusted herself to him, but after a few seconds she fully entrusted herself to him.

With her head and back in his arms, she closed her eyes and gave in to his tongue.

After she closed her eyes, sobbed a few times, and shed some tears, Sayama moved away.

She then took a breath. It was a large and warm breath, but her breathing had calmed.

"You're right. I won't be alone," she said quietly. "You'll be with me."

"It's not that I *will be* with you. I *am* with you."

"Yeah, b-but… I'm Setsu right now."

"Is that a problem, Sadagiri-kun?"

Hearing him call her name, she once more thought about what he had meant when he said "that is not the case".

…Just like my parents, he must trust in my name.

In that case, he would not be the only one. Kazami, Izumo, and the others at UCAT would be the same.

"Yeah…"

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and felt her strength return.

His arms held her tight so that strength would not escape and he spoke.

"I should not have done that. It seems my odd conjectures stirred up your unease. …In apology, let us find your parents."

"Eh?"

She looked up at him from within his arms and found him looking at her expressionlessly.

"I do not believe people simply disappear. They may be lost, but annoyingly enough, they do not vanish altogether. A certain old monkey proves that well enough. So let us find the parents that you have lost sight of."

"B-but we don't know where they are."

"No, we do not. We do not know where they are now or what they are doing. But at the very least…"

His right arm left her back and touched her chest. The left side of her chest.

"I feel pain here, but what about you, Shinjou-kun? Also, we already have a hint."

"Eh?"

"What you do not know always lies on the path to liberation. … Also, I more or less know where 3rd-Gear's base is. Once we arrive at the temple up above, I will tell you that. And tonight or some other time, we can discuss the hint we have received here."

He then held something up for her to see.

"The hint is contained in the documents Kashima sent us. It may

have been a good thing for me that you did not read it very carefully. Now I can be the one to give you the information that may act as a hint to finding your parents.”

Chapter 26

“Jab of Guidance”

Indicate the direction to travel
Here there is nothing but different battlefields
Look to your feet and you will find iron

●

A narrow strip of beach bordered the ocean.

A forest lay behind the beach and a rocky area separated them.

A woman stood on the rocks after coming from the forest.

It was Ooki who wore a white coat and gray shorts.

After walking from the nearby medical tent, she stretched atop the rocks.

“Nn. This is such a nice place.”

…I don’t like all the salt water out there, though.

The salty wind was oddly stimulating. It was bad for her health and she needed to wash it away with spring water later, but it seemed to tense up her body.

“Will it help me lose weight?”

“Oh? You don’t look like someone who needs to worry about that,” said a female voice.

The voice came from below, so Ooki stopped walking and stretching.

Down below, a woman with long gray hair lay on a beach mat. She wore a black and gold swimsuit.

“Oh, Diana-san.”

Ooki jumped down from the rocky area. The difference in height was approximately a meter, but she was landing on the beach. The sand should have absorbed the shock, but for some reason, her feet slipped and she fell forward.

She ended up lying next to Diana in the same position.

“Ow….”

Don’t cry. Don’t cry, she told herself. The woman lying next to her was the inspector from German UCAT. Those children were working so hard, so she would feel bad if Germany was told Japanese UCAT’s people cried at the slightest provocation.

She sat up, wiped at the corners of her eyes, and brushed the sand from her clothes and hair. *It’s a little salty,* she thought while turning to Diana who lay with her bikini top undone.

Diana lowered her sunglasses and knitted her brow a little.

“Are you okay?”

“Oh, y-yes. I am.”

Ooki straightened up and then bowed, hoping the woman would

report that Japanese UCAT's people were polite.

She then looked back at Diana as she lay on the beach mat.

"Are you tanning?"

"Yes. This kind of sun is rare in Germany, so it's for my health as well."

"I see."

Ooki wondered what to do. She was usually the one giving the tests, so it made her nervous to be inspected like this. She had heard it was best to make a good impression in an interview and the fastest way of making a good impression was to compliment the person.

…This situation showed up in the drama I saw the other day. How did that compliment go again?

"Heh heh heh. Girly, you've sure got some nice skin."

"That's Pervsuke's catch phrase from the Sunday 8:00 drama 'Return of Mito Kimon', isn't it?"

"So you recognized it. Those people always use the back gate for assassinations. And when they're found, they say 'Ugh, what a pain. Suke-san, Kaku-san, get them!' I think there's something a little off about that."

"Yes. Now, for a sudden change of subject, is the Hiba boy okay?"

"Oh, yes. That is sudden, but he is. Izumo-kun made sure not to hurt him too badly. He's currently being treated by Doctor Chao in the medical tent and he should be fully recovered by tonight. He was given a sedative, so he's sleeping now."

"Gut. Then what about the Izumo boy?"

Ooki thought for a moment and wondered if she should really say this.

"He's actually sleeping in the tent for Kazami-san and the other girls. He'll apparently recover on his own by tonight."

"Oh? He seemed fine during the fight just now."

"Apparently, he was putting on a strong front." Ooki smiled while sensing the ends of her eyebrows lowering. "He said Hiba-kun would be too full of his own power otherwise."

"And what about Mikage?"

"Oh, right. Since letting her know Izumo-kun's condition would make it all meaningless, Sibyl-san is showing her around the island. There's an orchard over there and Sibyl-san said she could learn a

lot there." She thought for a moment. "It seems like it was quite a shock for her that Hiba-kun lost."

"I didn't notice much of a difference."

"From what I can tell, she may provide some unexpected surprises, but she may normally be even more expressionless than Sayama-kun. As your teacher, I-… Oh, I'm sorry, Diana-san. I'm not your teacher. That's a bad habit of mine."

She scratched her head and Diana's shoulders shook in laughter.

"Could you please continue, teacher?"

"Oh, yes, yes."

Ooki stretched her knees forward and wondered if tanning would be good for her health as well.

"I've been thinking about what kind of place this is in Mikage-san's mind. Hiba-kun was forced to come here because his house was ruined and because his mother insisted, but for Mikage-san…"

"She just wants to be with the Hiba boy, right?"

"Yes, but what if Hiba-kun tries to go somewhere Mikage-san doesn't want to go?"

"Such as?"

終わりのプロローグ

“Well…” Ooki thought. “Such as a place where he’d be fine even without her.”

She nodded and wondered if she was using Japanese properly before continuing.

“It would be somewhere that did not include her if Hiba-kun lost. It would be somewhere in which he had the power to fight without Susamikado and everyone else welcomed him in her place.”

She stared out to sea before finishing her thought.

“For example, here.”

“What an odd thing to think about.”

“Is it really?”

“If he were to go to a place she does not want, it would mean losing his power to fight. And if that happened, why would everyone welcome him?”

Diana reached for the glass holder next to her beach mat. The glass in the styrofoam holder produced a light sound that indicated some ice remained inside.

As if that sound were a signal, Diana spoke.

“Or were they able to welcome him when he lost because they were certain in their victory? The loser must obey the victor even if they do not want to. Is that it? However, the Hiba boy’s objective and current position are different from yours.”

“Of course they’re different.”

“Eh?”

Diana tilted her head, so Ooki explained.

“They couldn’t be the same. After all…um…how should I put it? Um…uh…”

She crossed her arms. She did not quite understand what she wanted to say, but what Diana had said was not it. She was almost certain of that, so she carefully thought without rushing.

“Ah.”

She looked out to sea. Diana did so too and finally tilted her head again.

“There’s nothing there.”

“No, um, what I mean is… You still saw the same scenery, right?”

Ooki gave an internal cry of joy.

“Even if we have different objectives and stand in different positions, we can still see the same scenery if we try.”

"…"

"Winning and losing isn't the only important thing. If you don't understand that, you'll only think about making your opponent lose. But my teacher's instincts think Hiba-kun is looking to the same place as us."

She emphasized being a teacher again, but she no longer cared.

"But at some point, he may have started looking down at his own feet and I don't think he's let Mikage-san know. But he's a good kid. They all are: Izumo-kun, Kazami-san, Sayama-kun, Shinjou-san, Hiba-kun, and Mikage-san."

"Oh, my. I get the feeling you would call even your enemy a good kid."

"They probably are. Enemy or not, everyone should be looking to the same place. For example, they probably really, really want to get some sleep and they probably want to laze around."

"It looks like this entire conversation was on a much lower level than I thought it was."

"D-don't be rude."

Ooki turned toward Diana and found the woman smiling.

"Anyway, you say they are different types of good kids?"

"Yes, they are all good kids. Even if their levels of perversion, violence, and sophistry vary."

"Those are some small yet oddly meaningful variations."

"I-I don't have any other good examples."

As soon as Ooki said that, she heard footsteps from the rocky area behind her.

She turned to find Kazami peering at them from above the rocks.

"Ooki-sensei… And Diana-san too?"

"Oh? Is there something you don't want to say around me?"

Diana held a hand over her chest and turned toward the rocky area.

With the woman looking at her, Kazami was unsure what to say. She would normally have Izumo by her side and he would give her some kind of guidance, but that was not the case now.

"Um…"

She hesitated until Ooki gave a guess.

"Did Sayama-kun do something?"

He had not been seen since announcing he would buy some

necessary items in Kurashiki.

Ooki suspected he was up to something, but she did not know what. Nevertheless, if Kazami wanted something now, it likely had to do with him.

Diana then asked another question with a smile.

"He has been searching for 3rd-Gear, hasn't he? The adults are unable to act thanks to the other UCATs and the inspectors like me, so you children are doing something instead." She nodded. "Fine then. I will take a break from my job and pretend I don't hear any of this."

"How are we supposed to trust you about that?"

"Oh? Germans rival the British in how seriously we take our breaks."

"And does taking a break here mean you're also taking a break from those German customs?"

"Herrlich. I see you're good at logic games. I suppose that qualifies as a passing grade."

Diana lay back down, put on her swimsuit, sat up, and retied the swimsuit.

"In that case, I will do my job. For example, by missing out on this information, I will gain something later. …How about that? Can you make beneficial use of this information I am going to miss out on? Such as…Oh, I know. Successfully completing the Leviathan Road with 3rd-Gear."

"We can do that," immediately replied Ooki rather than Kazami.

Diana turned toward her, but she did not care.

"This will turn out well, won't it, Kazami-san?"

"Eh? Oh…yes. Of course it will."

Diana gave a bitter laugh at that and she brought a hand to her mouth to suppress it.

"Now, please give this information I will miss out on. What does that Sayama boy have to say?"

"About that… Ooki-sensei, is Sibyl around?"

"Huh? She went off with Mikage-san earlier. What do you need?"

"Well…" Kazami held up the object in her right hand so they could see. "I got a call from Sayama. He says he knows where 3rd-Gear's base is located."

"Oh, my," said Diana while looking up. "But not even Japanese

UCAT's Okayama branch and Shimane's western headquarters knows that."

"Yes, but he says he'll tell us after impressing Shinjou by telling her. That makes me want to throw him to the ground, but I thought I should gather together Team Leviathan (minus the two sleeping idiots) beforehand. I want Sibyl because she can use her transmitter to contact everyone's cell phones."

"Oh, I get it now," said Ooki. "Yeah, her beepy thing would help. Here, I'll do it for her."

"Stop! You'll break it!! And what do you mean 'beepy thing'?"

"It makes weird sounds when you press the buttons. By the way, the one for the TV is called the the clicky thing. Right?"

She turned to Diana for support, but the other woman frantically shook her head.

"I just call it a clicker."

"Oh, so that's what they call it in Germany."

While looking down at them from the rocks, Kazami rested her cheek on her hand.

"I thought it was just my parents, but it looks like everyone's like this."

●

The grounds of the Achi Shrine were vast.

At the top of the stairs was a large area of gravel. The main building was directly ahead and the other buildings were arranged in a wide circle around that main building.

To the west of the shrine grounds was a wooden viewing platform. It had a roof and it stuck out from the sharply-sloped ground like a balcony. It was supported by several thick wooden pillars below.

Shinjou was currently looking out from the edge.

"Sayama-kun, it feels like we were thrown out into the trees of the forest."

"Yes. This is like a small mountain with a surprisingly steep slope."

Sayama sat on a wooden protrusion from the wall and he placed his cell phone in his pocket.

Shinjou sat down to his left and reached for Baku on his shoulder.

"So… Where is 3rd-Gear's base?"

"Heh heh heh. Do you want to know?"

"U-um… Please stop teasing me and just tell me."

"I am not teasing you. I simply enjoy seeing you growing so impatient."

"That's called teasing me."

Sayama thought as he watched her frown in impatience.

…How enjoyable.

But the world functioned on the principle of give and take. The world required he pay 1 unit of Sayama difficulty for this 1 unit of Sayama pleasure.

"Then I have a simple question for you: where do you think 3rd-Gear's base is?"

"Here," she immediately replied. "If 3rd-Gear's base is in Kurashiki, it has to be here. We got a good look at Kurashiki earlier, remember? It's an old city and it hasn't changed in the past sixty years. In which case…"

"Holding the high ground would help in case enemies attacked from all four directions?"

"Yes. That's why I think this would be the best place. And it may be weird, but…this is a shrine. If the people of 3rd-Gear are superstitious, I think they would choose here."

"I see."

Sayama nodded and felt that was a convincing argument.

"But Shinjou-kun, do you realize there is a flaw in your reasoning?"

"Yes. It's that-…"

"That 3rd-Gear moved after their clash with 1st-Gear, right?"

Shinjou nodded and leaned over in front of him.

…Does she want to rest her head on my lap?

He spread his arms to welcome her, but she instead opened the bag on his opposite side.

"Let's see… Where's the map? …Sayama-kun, what's with that deep breathing pose?"

"Heh heh heh. Shinjou-kun, you are a wonderful person who far exceeds my expectations."

"I'm not sure what just happened in your brain, but thanks. Anyway, look."

She spread out the large sightseeing map of Kurashiki so he could see.

"We mentioned it while climbing the stairs, but Kurashiki has another mountain. Mukouyama is about four hundred meters southeast of here and it's actually larger than this one."

"But if they were there, UCAT would notice. And 3rd-Gear must have realized they are being monitored."

Sayama grabbed the cloth wrapper hanging from the backpack. He pulled Gyes's sword from within. The thin metal blade measured around a meter, and yet…

"It is light. It feels like holding an aluminum ruler."

"D-don't move it around too much. It might have some kind of trap."

"There is no danger of that. 3rd-Gear's automatons are rational. They would know doing that gives us an excuse to attack." He took a breath. "One of those automatons told us to find them and that statement came from her belief that UCAT had yet to find 3rd-Gear's fortress."

"Oh, you're right." Shinjou then seemed to realize something. "So that's it. Was it five years ago that they clashed with 1st-Gear? Ooshiro-san said they vanished and haven't been seen since, right?"

"Exactly right."

"Then where is their base on this map?"

Shinjou looked to the map and saw a few candidate locations. She figured a wide flat area would be best for a large facility and she tilted her head.

"It could be at the amusement park north of the train station…and the roundabout south of the station would be good too. The station behind them would form a barricade against attacks from airplanes. But…"

"But?"

"Those places have already been investigated, haven't they?"

"Are you trying to say that 3rd-Gear might not be in Kurashiki at all?"

"Yeah…"

"I see." Sayama had muttered those same words a few times already. "Slipping into a blind spot is indeed the same as not being there at all. This is much like 2nd-Gear's Art of Walking."

“You mean they really are in Kurashiki?”

“Yes,” he answered with a nod.

He looked to the map and realized the sword in his hand was in the way.

He tossed the sword over the edge of the viewing platform.

He heard something falling into the leaves covering the slope behind him and then Shinjou closed the map and frantically stood up to his left.

“S-Sayama-kun! You can’t just throw it away!”

“But we no longer need it, Shinjou-kun. More importantly, let me see the map.”

“Eh?”

He folded his arms and spoke to her.

“Shinjou-kun, open the map once more.”

“O-okay…”

She did so and he thanked her before running his finger along the map.

“3rd-Gear changed location. UCAT investigated once they detected the string vibration disturbance and 1st-Gear checked at the same time, but neither one found anything. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes. That’s why they checked elsewhere too, but they never found 3rd-Gear.”

“However, they overlooked two important factors.”

“Eh?”

“The automatons we saw yesterday could move through Low-Gear and they were certain UCAT had not located their fortress. Why was that?”

“Because they have UCAT information?”

“Exactly,” said Sayama. “Now, where did they receive that information? They either have a spy or a skillful information broker has been giving them some small pieces of information. I would like to argue the latter.”

“Why? Do you have a reason for that?”

“3rd-Gear was not present when 1st-Gear reinvestigated the area. When their comrades were killed, 1st-Gear would have immediately sent out a recon team. A recon team on a mission of vengeance. To move before that, 3rd-Gear would have to be cowardly or have someone giving them 1st-Gear’s information.

When you combine that with their knowledge of Low-Gear's actions, it is easier to assume the existence of a common information broker than two different spies," said Sayama. "Now, if 3rd-Gear had all our information, where would they hide?"

"Eh?"

Shinjou gave a voice of confusion, but her eyebrows soon rose.

"You don't mean…"

"I do, Shinjou-kun. We no longer need the sword. 3rd-Gear moved from here, but once 1st-Gear and Low-Gear had finished investigating…they only had to move back." He gave a bitter smile. "The stupider the organization, the more restricted the lower levels are. Do you really think the UCAT members on the scene would have suggested the following to their superiors? 'I'm sorry, but could we go back and check the areas you already used so much manpower to investigate?' Of course, this will be my loss if they had a superior who would agree to that. But…"

"But?"

"The old man said UCAT's Okayama branch checked everywhere, but a check is done once and it does not vanish. They rolled across everything and concluded it was not here."

He stood up.

"I win."

He held out his hand and Shinjou frantically folded up the map and took his hand.

"You certainly are confident. …This will be a big deal if you're wrong."

"It will be an even bigger deal if I am right, Shinjou-kun. Now, prepare yourself."

He pulled on her hand to help her up and bring her next to him.

"We will now settle this conflict with the gods."

●

A white train station had a green mountain in the background.

The sign on the building said Okutama Station and the midday sun washed over it.

Okutama was the terminal station of Tokyo's Oume line. With the exception of tourists, it was rarely busy outside of the morning and night. Currently, only two people exited the station and entered the

midday sun.

They both wore black and they both had white hair, but one was a middle-aged man in sunglasses and the other was his maid.

The middle-aged man looked up into the sky.

“Sf, bring around the car.”

“Tes. Itaru-sama, please wait a moment. I will be right back.”

The maid, Sf, ran down the road in front of the station. The area in front of the station gradually sloped down to the east and she ran past restaurants and signs to guide tourists.

She finally arrived at an intersection down the slope.

“Was there a parking lot that way?” wondered Itaru.

Sf continued on and entered the police box in front of the intersection.

A middle-aged policeman and Sf soon exited and Sf raised her right hand. The policeman bowed and Sf moved behind the police box.

Soon, a car drove out and the policeman saluted.

The light vehicle was black and contained the IAIM mark of an IAI affiliate company. Sf sat in the driver’s seat and the vehicle smoothly stopped next to Itaru and sounded its six-tone horn.

“Are you stupid? Why are you making us stand out so much?”

“Tes,” replied Sf after manually lowering the window. “I thought you might not notice.”

“I’m glad I did notice. By the way, why did you change to this car a few days ago? I seem to recall a stupid automaton saying German cars were the sturdiest in the world.”

“The times change, Itaru-sama. Until two days ago, you were riding a wonderful German UCAT car that copied the sturdiness of a BMW, Porsche, Benz, and AMG. It was known as the BPornzMG Ultimate, but I traded it in.”

“I was asking why. That thing was so sturdy that you didn’t even notice when you hit something.”

Sf nodded in the driver’s seat while still facing forward.

“Tes. It was indeed a wonderfully sturdy car. It was so wonderful that, when on our way to see the autumn leaves, it took 72 seconds to realize I had hit Kazuo-sama’s car and knocked it off a cliff.”

“And you only noticed because of the odd explosion behind us, right?”

“Tes. When I backed up, I got a solid hit on Kazuo-sama as he was calling for help. Hitting him with the backfire earned an extra 300 Sf points. However, I was a bit late to notice that as well, so I stepped on him. I have determined it was a sturdy vehicle. …Kazuo-sama is also sturdy for escaping that with only some scrapes.”

“Stop reminding me of unpleasant things. Again, what is this?”

“Tes. It is a light vehicle created by the excessive free time and wasted effort that Japanese UCAT’s development department has in abundance. It is known as the Refresher. For a comparison commercial, German UCAT staged a full speed collision while driving backwards on the autobahn, but it seems the Refresher managed to refreshingly pierce right through the BPornzMG. German UCAT offered a more heavily-equipped version of the BPornzMG, but I chose this one because the taxes are cheaper.”

“I see, I see. That was a little drawn-out, but I get it now. … Whose money did you buy it with!?”

“Tes.” Sf nodded. “I used my savings. Are you saying you are unaware of my savings, Itaru-sama?”

“I am. Now tell me what you mean by that.”

“Tes. That is my term for the ATM card inside the wallet I have been left with.”

“That. Belongs. To me. You used my money without asking, didn’t you!?”

“No, I asked for and received your permission. The other day, I asked if I could use a little money.”

“Wait,” said Itaru. “That was when I asked you to buy some ultrapure water.”

“Tes. You seem to have overlooked the catalogue I was holding behind my back. Has this solved the mystery?”

“I can’t believe this. Also, why did you borrow the parking spot at that police box?”

He pointed at the police box and glared at SF, but she did not mind.

“Earlier, when I asked you how to secure a parking spot near here, you told me to try seduction.”

“And did you?”

“Tes. I activated my seduction functionality at the police box and lifted my skirt by an entire centimeter. At that point, the partially-

assembled Gatling gun inside my skirt fell to the floor."

"That's not seduction! It's a threat!"

Itaru swore, opened the 4-door vehicle's back door, threw his cane in the narrow back seat, and then got in himself.

"Just bring me home. Everything around me ends up dyed in the worst colors."

As he closed the door and spoke, the Refresher performed a 180 degree turn as if spinning, but he was already used to it. He slid the joint sofa forward to eliminate the foot space and sat sideways. He stuck his unmoving leg toward the opposite door and fixed himself in place.

Finally, he reached into his pocket and pulled something out.

"That is the envelope containing the documents the Hiba woman gave you, isn't it?"

"Do you want to know what's inside?"

"No, I am busy driving."

"Then I will tell you."

As he spoke, he grabbed the envelope.

"…"

And he ripped it apart. There were around a dozen pages inside, but they could all be heard tearing apart.

"This is the information on the Hiba Miki who was left with Hiba-sensei. She wanted me to use this to search for her."

He grabbed the torn documents and ripped them each apart again. He tore them again and again until they were nothing but small pieces.

"This is apparently all the information she's gathered after searching for so long."

"Why are you throwing it away?"

"Because it's meaningless. That girl is searching for the place she is meant to be."

He tossed the shredded paper into the trunk area and it came apart to scatter like snow. As he continued to scatter that snow in the trunk, he looked in the rearview mirror.

In the mirror, he saw Sf continue to face forward.

"It's a difficult issue. Do you know when Hiba Miki was left with Hiba-sensei?"

"No, not at all."

“It was long before you came here. On the night of the Great Kansai Earthquake, Hiba Ryuuichi left an automaton named Mikage at his house and then lost his life in the secondary damage of the earthquake. The positive concept activity caused by the activation of the negative concepts made Mikage wake up that night.” He took a breath. “And afterwards, a girl named Miki was left with Hiba-sensei. She had a note in Hiba Ryuuichi’s handwriting that said, ‘I picked her up at a 9th-Gear base. Treat her like a member of the Hiba family.’ ”

Just as he was about to throw the last of the paper shreds, he realized the paper was not coming apart.

He looked and saw a black clip holding the pieces of the documents together. He removed the clip and scattered the last of the paper in the trunk.

“Clean up the trunk later.”

“Tes. Is it all burnable trash?”

“Yes,” said Itaru as he put the clip in his pocket.

“What kind of person was Hiba Ryuuichi?” asked Sf.

“He wasn’t originally from UCAT. He was a swordsman and his job was to destroy the remnants of the various Gears that were known in Low-Gear as monsters. Especially the ones who killed indiscriminately. He stood out due to his red eyes.” Itaru gave a bitter laugh. “Here’s an embarrassing story. We had a few clashes with him, but at one point, a certain man and I went and bowed down to him. We begged him to help us as an independent member of UCAT’s special division.”

“Were you successful?”

“I wasn’t able to accomplish anything, but the man I was with told me he would handle it and then spoke alone with Hiba Ryuuichi in his study. The two of them left after only three minutes and Hiba Ryuuichi signed an agreement to help as an independent member, but only when he felt like it.”

“I have never heard of an independent member.”

“It’s just for show. The actual position still exists, but only people who can singlehandedly take on a god of war or mechanical dragon are given it. We don’t have anyone like that now. …In the history of every UCAT, only a few people have ever qualified. A few of the National Defense Department’s Eight Great Dragon Kings qualified

and then a few of the Five Great Peaks qualified." He narrowed his eyes. "Hiba Ryuuichi was one of the Five Great Peaks along with Diana. All of the Five Great Peaks were authorized as independent members save the man who persuaded Hiba Ryuuichi."

"Tes." Sf nodded. "According to that story, I have determined you are useless."

"Yes. You're exactly right about that. Machines are quite perceptive. Especially the ones without emotions."

He pulled the clip from his pocket, glanced toward the paper scraps in the trunk, and tossed the clip into it.

However, he soon reached out, calmly picked up the clip, and once again placed it in his pocket.

"But that's fine. You say some good things every once in a while. You exactly pinpointed my value."

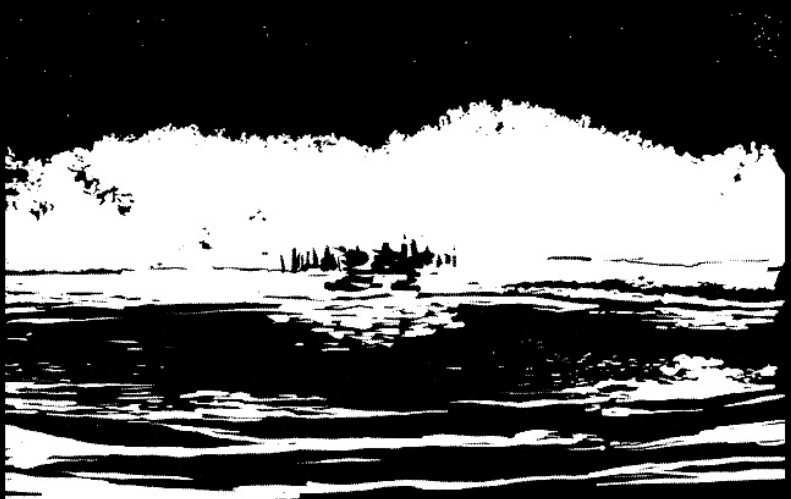
"Tes. I have determined that is also related to why you do not have me do any unnecessary work. If you are delighted, please email your enthusiastic words of encouragement to the Sf support team in German UCAT. If you do…"

She paused.

"I am sure they will send some even more wonderful features."

Chapter 27

“First Time Behavior”



This is your first time to be shown this
This is your first time to be seen like this
And next time…

●

The nighttime sea was illuminated by the lights on the beach and the occasional cooking fires.

Several silhouettes moved within the light and produced plenty of noise. The noise was made up of voices, crackling firewood, and sizzling oil on the steel plates placed over the fires.

Soon, one voice rose above the others. It was Kazami's.

"Okay, this is Kazami Chisato of Team Leviathan and I think I'm going to signal the beginning of dinner. UCAT Director Ooshiro and Supervisor Ooshiro were supposed to be here, but one says he's too busy developing some photos and the other says he doesn't like sunny places."

She wore a blue T-shirt and scratched her head in the center of the group.

She looked around and saw meat and vegetables covering the steel plates. Everyone already held chopsticks, forks, and plates of sauce, so their battle preparations were complete.

The steel plate for Team Leviathan's boys was the most remarkable one.

Izumo was crouched down and smelling the meat with his face just off the surface of the plate.

Next to him, Sayama was trying to press his face down onto the hot surface.

"S-stop, Sayama-kun! Kazami-san will kill you!"

I won't go that far. I'll get as close as possible, though, mentally corrected Kazami as she looked at them and shrugged.

"Well, that also means we're spared having those annoying and bizarre superiors here."

She took in a breath.

"Now eat!"

The sudden movement set the air in motion and Kazami dashed over to her seat.

"H-huh? Kazami-san, why are you sitting next to Izumo-san? The girls' spot is over there."

"Ha ha ha. Shinjou-kun, commenting on her carnivorous diet is what will truly make her kill you."

"Shut up."

She wanted to point out that Shinjou was also here despite being a girl at the moment, but she held her tongue. Hiba and Mikage still did not know the truth about her.

She averted her gaze and called quietly to Shinjou from behind Izumo.

Shinjou turned toward her with some squash in her mouth and Kazami whispered while hiding behind Izumo's back.

"What are you going to do about the tents? Hiba is with you, isn't he?"

Shinjou was not joining the girl's tent in order to keep her condition a secret. She would move to the girl's tent only when going to sleep at night, but the timing would be tricky.

"At night, I'll go for a walk to buy time until everyone falls asleep and then I'll join you."

"We have Mikage with us, so you'll have to cover yourself with a sleeping bag."

"We have no choice," said Shinjou with a troubled smile.

Kazami wanted to say they *did* have a choice, but that was her own opinion and she kept it to herself.

She felt she had become more reserved around others recently.

…Is that what it means to grow up?

She realized Sayama had grown sharper in his insight yet less piercing in his comments and Izumo had started talking about others.

…I just hope I'm not letting my guard down.

She convinced herself she was fine as long as she continued hoping that.

She noticed Izumo speaking with Hiba who sat across from her. They were using gestures to indicate how they had given damage in the fight that day and to explain the most efficient ways of moving. Sayama did not seem to be paying attention, but he was almost certainly putting it all to memory. Shinjou simply seemed shocked at the depth of the conversation.

…Maybe we can actually get along.

At that point, she heard someone stand up behind her.

"?"

She wondered who it was and Hiba answered from in front of her.

"Mikage-san."

Kazami turned and saw Mikage walking away with a cane in one hand. She was walking toward the rocky area and the tents.

Hiba frantically stood up.

“Mikage-san.”

But she did not turn around. With her shoulders lowered a little, she placed a hand on the rocks, slowly raised her hips on top of them, and leaned forward as if to crawl.

Hiba started walking over.

“I thought not helping her was the key to her evolution,” said Izumo.

Izumo then grabbed his can of beer from the ground and closed his eyes. As he brought the can to his mouth, Kazami glared at him and elbowed his arm.

“Whoa! Y-you spilled it. What was that for, Chisato!? The foam is all over my crotch.”

“You can deal with your crotch on your own. …More importantly, that was just mean, Kaku.”

Hiba turned toward her with slightly raised eyebrows, but he soon gave a smile with lowered ends of the eyebrows. He looked to the darkness into which Mikage had vanished and shook his head.

“No, I was wrong this time.”

“She trusted in your strength.”

“Yes.” Hiba sat down and sighed. “But I really didn’t think I’d lose.”

“Don’t worry, Hiba boy. This guy is an abnormal life form.”

“I know, Sayama-san, but Typhon is abnormal too.” He lowered his head. “And if something like this happens in the future…”

At that point, he suddenly smiled.

He looked at everyone with that smile and reached his chopsticks toward the steel plate.

“But let’s not get all depressing. Let’s hurry up and eat the meat.”

“You need to discuss this.”

Those words caused Hiba to freeze and they came from Shinjou.

She tilted her head, set down her plate, and gathered her hands on her lap.

“Even if the meat burns, Izumo-san will still eat it all, so we can just cook some more for ourselves. If you have something to discuss, I think you should do so. After all, you…um…” She thought. “You

don’t look like you have any friends.”

“Now you’re rejecting my entire personality!?”

“Don’t worry about it, Hiba,” cut in Kazami. “At any rate, if you’ve got something to say, then say it. These people may be insane, but they can keep a secret. Isn’t that right, Kaku? …Stop devouring all the meat!”

“Um, excuse me. Are you actually going to let me speak?”

Hiba raised his hand as he spoke and Kazami turned back toward him while holding Izumo by the collar.

Hiba faced her while lowering his shoulders and he placed withered cabbage on his plate as he spoke.

“All of you are letting the vegetables burn by not eating them. You shouldn’t let that happen.”

“Of course we should.” Izumo removed Kazami’s hand and rose up. “A stupid man who backs down before a single girl is violating the rules of nature. He should be castrated and executed.”

“H-how rude!” protested Hiba. “I may be stupid, but I want to stay a proper man!”

“Kazami, don’t you want to do something about these two that have what it takes to qualify as male but not as human?” commented Sayama.

Next to him, Shinjou looked toward Kazami and then closed her eyes and covered her ears.

“I-I won’t look or listen, so d-do what you have to, Kazami-san.”

Izumo and Hiba faced Kazami and exchanged a serious glance.

“We can discuss this later.”

“Sounds good.”

They shook hands across the steel plate.

Is there something wrong with me if I want to knock every single one of them to the ground? wondered Kazami.

But before she could think further, Izumo spoke to Hiba.

“Still, you went down fast in that battle despite talking so much about protecting her.”

“Kaku, you shouldn’t use yourself as a standard.”

“But I’m not even doing that. Hey, stupid Sayama, what would you do if someone was about to hit you?”

Sayama looked to Shinjou who had only just removed her hands from her ears. He took her hand and placed it on his cheek.

“Eh?” said Shinjou because she had not been listening.

“If it was Shinjou-kun, I might happily accept the blow.”

“Okay, you don’t get to talk anymore. Chisato, what would you do?”

Kazami thought about the question. She had received blows during battle in the past. Recently, she had started defending with G-Sp2, but when she could not do that…

“If I can’t block it with G-Sp2, I evade. I don’t have the same defenses as you.”

“But when Hiba took my first hit, he didn’t even try to evade. That’s why I could hit him with the second one right away. Why was that, Hiba?”

“Because…I thought I could keep going, but the hit was stronger than I thought it would be.”

“Here’s the thing, Hiba. I wasn’t doing anything out of the ordinary. Do you know what it means if the hit was stronger than you imagined it would be? It means you have a weak imagination.”

Izumo scratched at his head and Kazami tilted her head.

Hiba had more combat experience than them, so he would naturally have more experience in taking damage.

But, thought Kazami just before Shinjou expressed the rest of the thought.

“Ryuuji-kun, do you not have much experience in being hit by attacks?”

She seemed hesitant to ask and Hiba immediately reacted.

He gasped and his expression changed from an exhausted smile to tension.

…What?

Kazami looked to Izumo and found him taking this chance to devour the meat, so she threw a right hook.

“H-hey, Kaku. What does this mean?”

“…”

“C’mon, don’t go all silent like that.”

“C-c’mon, I was choking! Honestly, Shinjou is exactly right. Hiba has excellent instincts when it comes to making attacks, but he lacks the instincts for receiving them. And you know why that is, don’t you?”

“Yes.” He nodded, lowered his head, and bit his lip. “It’s Mikage-

san."

"Eh? Mikage? But why?"

"The damage to Susamikado is fed back to the pilot, but she takes it all on herself to leave me unharmed." He let out a breath. "Izumo-san's attacks were unexpectedly powerful because she would normally take the damage. The god of war lessens it somewhat with the armor and buffering devices, but she's still taking that much damage. I do fight in the dojo, though."

"And how many of the people in the dojo are using all their strength? You need to remember this. Your current method of attack is based on the damage going to Mikage, even though you don't want to make that sacrifice. You claim to be protecting her, but what you're doing just barely qualifies. If you were to die while trying to protect her…"

Sayama continued for him.

"Mikage-kun would die in his stead?"

That question brought silence and Kazami gave a small sigh.

…So that's it.

From Hiba's perspective, he could not allow the enemy to injure Mikage, but it meant injuring her himself to protect her.

But from Mikage's perspective as someone who could not speak or walk properly, taking on that damage was her one and only way of helping the person who was trying to protect her.

…How awkward.

It was awkward, but she felt they both wished to show their concern in a precise manner.

She and Izumo were fine with injuring each other in battle as long as they won and survived. That was both awkward and imprecise.

However, not everyone was the same. It was possible their method could easily get them killed in some situations and she did not know what she would do if Izumo were to die.

For that reason, she said nothing about Hiba's situation.

…I'm getting cold feet. But still…

"Anyway, let's eat to prepare for tomorrow."

…We can manage somehow or other.

●

A dimly-lit room was surrounded by thirty meter prefab walls and

it had been dug down into oil-stained concrete. The depths of the hole were covered in shadow and something with a long, narrow form lay in the center.

Near the entrance, a passageway cut across above the hole. The suspended passageway was barely illuminated by the few lights on the ceiling.

A set of footsteps traversed that bridge-like passageway.

They belonged to Shino.

The metal passageway shook slightly as she walked across in a yellow dress and with a basket in hand.

She opened her mouth and spoke.

“It isn’t funny, Alex.”

“Regardless, becoming afraid of cicadas sounds exactly like something you would do.”

She was answered by a male voice produced by the speakers on the ceiling.

That voice she referred to as Alex laughed before continuing.

“At any rate, it is fortunate you were able to return. Even I was worried.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“You can ask Tatsumi. Mikoku was so worried she almost came back from Okayama.”

“She always worries too much. So is everyone in the back office?”

“If my holy memory is correct, three are in the nap room while the supervisor and one other are in the office. Should I activate my super search mode of justice?”

Shino stopped walking.

“Hmm. You probably should get used to using it, so I guess so.”

After only a short pause, Alex’s voice came from the ceiling once more.

“In the nap room, one is on the top bunk, one on the bottom, and one on the floor. They are all asleep. The one on the floor is saying ‘Akemi, that’s it for me. I can’t go on.’ The supervisor and Tatsumi are in the office. They are playing cards. What is a ‘kuitan’? Tatsumi is drinking what I believe to be an alcoholic beverage.”

“Hold it right there, Alex! Why are you eavesdropping on us!?”

A door on the back wall opened and let some light in. Tatsumi stood in the center of the rectangle of light with her hands on her

hips. She bent back and took a drink from the paper cup in her hand.

"Do heroes of justice go around peeping these days?"

"No, Tatsumi-san. I told him to-…"

Shino hurriedly tried to explain, but Alex cut her off.

"This incident was entirely my doing. No responsibility lies with Shino."

"Is that so? Alex, I see you're an ally of little girls as well as of justice."

"I-I am not a little girl!"

"You don't get to say that after being too afraid of cicadas to come during the day! Thanks to that, *I* was forced to make everyone's food. Honestly."

She held the cup of alcohol in both hands and collapsed drunkenly to the floor.

The supervisor nodded while standing behind her.

"Try imagining how bad it was for those of us who had to eat it, Miss Tatsumi. Oh, and one other thing."

He stuck a token indicating a bet into her hair.

"Don't try to escape. This makes my bet 3000 yen."

He grabbed the back of her collar and turned her around, so Shino frantically raised her basket.

"U-um, supervisor. I have the corrected version of dinner."

"I'll eat that later, Shino-san. Sorry, but just leave it there. By the way, I hear you had a rough time last night. Are you okay?"

"Yes. It traumatized me a little, but I should recover as I see all the dogs off. It sounds like Hajji's intelligence team can use the information we brought back, but it has a concept barrier."

"In my position, all I can do is tell them to hurry up. But if they do that, I promise you we'll figure out what it means and either catch up to or reproduce the technology. You tell them to hurry it up too, Shino-san."

"I will."

The man nodded, reached for the door while dragging Tatsumi behind him, and then looked up.

"Shino-san, could you speak with Alex? This is a new body, so even an ally of justice is going to be worried."

"I will," she replied just as the door closed.

"They really are kind when it comes to you," said Alex after a pause.

"Hm. I'm used to it, so it's hard to tell."

She smiled bitterly and ran over to the door. She placed the basket next to it and looked to the side.

Passageways surrounded the large hole in the ground and the lights were only located in the four corners of the ceiling. She looked to the right of the door and walked below the northwestern light. There, she tapped on the railing to her left.

"How is your new body, Alex?"

"I believe this will most likely be my final body."

"Y-you can't say things like that. We'll defeat UCAT and then all be together."

"You are a perceptive girl. I said the same thing to Tatsumi and she ignored me."

"That's because…"

Shino trailed off because speaking of a difference in thinking between her and Tatsumi would not accomplish anything.

After some hesitation, she gave a safe question.

"How are you feeling?"

"I have yet to reach a perfect state. A few modifications have yet to be done and it seems my armaments of justice will not be ready in time. I will be making an appearance during the attack tomorrow, but the biggest problem is that my paint job will not be ready in time."

"Your paint job?"

"Yes," said Alex. "An ally of justice must be dyed in more magnificent colors than anything else around. In my case, I will need the blue and red that point to my justice and freedom as well as some bright stars."

"What difference does it make whether you paint that on or not?"

"Justice must be immediately recognizable as such," he explained. "As soon as they see me, the people who tremble in fear will understand that justice has arrived. It will put their mind at ease when they realize destiny is on their side. I need an appearance that allows for that to happen."

"So…it's the same thing as full-body tights on a person?"

"Indeed. Those are such excellent outfits."

Shino brought a hand to her forehead. She felt common sense had recently grown twisted in everyone around her. She wondered what to do, but forced herself to view it as nothing more than changing times.

“But if you join the attack tomorrow, won’t you be going out in the open?” she asked.

“Yes. To be honest, I will lack persuasiveness if I call on the name of justice while looking like this. Tomorrow, I will be limiting myself to sneaking out in this temporary form,” he said. “After all, this is my chance to use this body to soar swiftly through the sky.”

“You flew plenty of times in your previous body, didn’t you?”

“Not like this. This time, there will be no restrictions. This will be different from the test flights within concept spaces or the times Sir Hajji would bring me to troubled areas of the world to test my combat ability. From now on, I will soar through the one remaining sky of my own free will and in the name of justice.” He took a breath. “I must thank those who have helped me. Especially Tatsumi’s mother. To make up for the time with her that Tatsumi has lost, I must show my appreciation for the small bit of life she gave me. And I will do so by flying for the sake of true justice.”

“Hey, Alex. Can I ask a question?”

“What is it, Shino?”

“What are you fighting for?” she asked.

“To fulfill my justice.”

“Th-then…what is that justice?”

“Well,” he said powerfully. He then gave his answer through the speakers. “Listen, Shino. The justice I seek is a simple thing. To ensure the people of the world must not experience what I did, I shall save them, inspire them, and make sure they rehabilitate themselves.” He took a breath. “I am prepared to pour great effort and spirit into accomplishing that.”

His booming answer caused Shino to look up. She felt as if his voice were shaking her body.

“…”

After a short silence, she smiled and nodded.

“Is that so? Alex, I think much the same thing. And I’m sure Tatsumi-san and the others do too. So let’s do our best.”

She spoke those words toward the hole down below.

Her voice continued down to the giant form faintly illuminated at the bottom of the factory.

The oil-stained industrial elevator contained a steel-colored machine with a long body.

It was a mechanical dragon.

●

Sayama and the others' meal came to an end.

They were all still hungry, but the meat had run out.

"Some continue to wield their weapons despite running out of ammunition," muttered Sayama.

He was looking at the plates still in Izumo and Kazami's hands.

When he turned to the right, Hiba nodded and shrugged. The fire below illuminated the boy.

"Do you think our grandparents did this kind of thing long ago? Have you heard what led the National Defense Department to realize the Concept War was going on?"

Sayama knew thanks to the documents he had read that day. Shinjou glanced over at him, but he did not turn to her.

It would be best to let him speak here, thought Sayama. *That will let him fit in better.*

Kazami tilted her head, put on some work gloves, and opened the container of rice.

"Was there some specific thing that made them realize?"

"You're still not done eati- O-okay, I'll answer, I'll answer. U-um, they noticed when some of the ley line extraction facilities they built were destroyed. They thought it had been done intentionally, so my grandfather was sent to the different facilities for security. And when he arrived at the Okayama facility, he ran across a certain individual." He laughed. "It was Siegfried Zonburg, advisor to the National Defense Department."

"You mean…?"

"Yes. He had been given secret orders. He was to appear cooperative while actually monitoring their technology and destroying the facilities manipulating the ley lines near his home country. But something odd happened. A facility he had not touched was destroyed, and in a single night. It happened to the one in Okayama."

Hiba looked up toward the sea. Shikoku was in that direction, but he only looked at the sea before turning back.

“From what I heard, my grandfather and Mr. Zonburg fought without bothering to ask any questions or give any explanations. However, they could not bring the fight to an end. They both knew the other’s ability a little too well. Even now, they sometimes talk over the phone. Anyway, something suddenly fell from the sky while they were fighting: a god of war and a dragon.”

“The god of war was the model for the one Sayama collected the day before yesterday, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. They were both dead, so they were gathered and studied. It was only once the National Defense Department used ley line extraction technology that they could detect concept spaces…and that was when they realized the Concept War was being fought here in Low-Gear. The other Gears did not like making battlefields of their own Gears, so they often chose this one as none of them cared if it was destroyed. Later, Mr. Zonburg discovered how to enter concept spaces and they managed to retrieve several pieces of wreckage and equipment from inside them. That was when the Concept War began for the National Defense Department.”

“E-excuse me,” interrupted Shinjou from next to Sayama. “Did Hiba-sensei tell you who was in the National Defense Department? And if so, was there someone named Shinjou?”

Her voice sounded calm enough, but the actual question was unexpected. Hiba must have sensed desperation in that question because he was slow to answer.

After a few seconds, he finally opened his mouth.

“I was only told that someone named Shinjou worked as the assistant of the National Defense Department’s leader.”

“I see…”

“I guess you already knew that. Um, can I ask something too?”

Everyone but Sayama frowned at that, but Hiba asked regardless.

“I occasionally hear about a group called the Army, but what is that? I’ve only fought 3rd-Gear.”

“That is a simple matter,” replied Sayama. “We have never seen them for ourselves, but it seems they are a group of survivors from the destroyed Gears who have gathered around 9th-Gear. It is also

a relatively new group. This is only my guess, but I suspect they only came together once the concepts activated ten years ago."

"Is that so?" said Hiba.

His shoulders lowered and this time Sayama asked him a question.

"Does something about that bother you?"

"Yes. Before he died, my father had the fake-sounding job of 'monster slayer' and he used a sword my grandfather got from a friend. …I was wondering if he was actually fighting the Army before they completely gathered together."

He did not stop there.

"Also, that may explain something else. I mentioned it to Kazami-san and Izumo-san yesterday, but my stepsister Miki disappeared about eight years ago. I wonder if that also had to do with the Army. Oh, but I'm not just going to blame everything on the Army."

"Yes. We know absolutely nothing about the Army's actions or goals, so we should avoid jumping to conclusions. However, it seems certain that they do not like the Leviathan Road."

Sayama had heard they were growing more active and they had also attacked UCAT early that morning. The attacker had apparently managed to escape, though.

"Hiba boy, let me tell you one thing. If you do defeat 3rd-Gear, there is a good chance the Army will target you."

"I thought as much… There's also a chance they'll notice I'm with you like this. They probably won't believe me if I insist I'm not working with you."

"Will you start working with us?"

He did not answer, but he did close his eyes in a troubled smile.

Sayama nodded and decided there was no need to rush the boy to an answer.

As such, he crossed his legs and returned to the previous topic.

"I do wonder what the Army is and what they are thinking."

"Eh?"

"Listen. They stole data from the core of UCAT and can likely use that to produce weapons. But what if they do so again after we complete the Leviathan Road with 3rd-Gear? They will receive complete information on gods of war. To prevent that, we must look at more than just the Leviathan Road."

The others all looked up in surprise which made him a bit happy.

…I am rejoicing at such a childish thing.

With that thought, he gave his prediction.

“If they truly intend to become our enemy, they should make some kind of move this time.”

●

A large white wall was colored by the dim light of the moon. It had windows at the top, but the bottom was taken up by a giant door. Based on the size of the windows, the door on the bottom was eight stories tall.

The windows reflected the light and singing came from within them, but not a single sound came from the giant door below.

There was motion to the side of the door as an elevator lowered from the emergency exit above.

The moonlight showed a woman with black hair and white clothing riding the elevator.

She held down the bottom of her outfit to fight the wind created by her descent and she spoke to herself with a smile in her voice.

“What are you doing, Miyako?”

As she looked to the night scenery of Kurashiki, the elevator came to a stop.

The elevator’s railing opened to the side and the console tilted its head. It was wondering how she had liked the ride, so she gently stroked the console.

“Wait here a bit.”

She had something to investigate.

She had hoped to check something with Apollo, but he had not shown up for dinner that night.

“Is there a basement?”

Even as she repeated the question she had been unable to ask, she was certain that one did exist. During the day, Moira 2nd had pointed to the floor after sacrificing herself to save Miyako.

Moira 2nd had since been taken to be repaired. According to Moira 1st, she would be as good as new once her body was replaced, but some adjustments would be needed and defects would likely show up.

“Once my middle sister is back, make sure to praise her instead of

being worried," Moira 3rd had said.

"I will," Miyako had replied.

She repeated that while taking the first step now.

"I will."

She walked toward the basement Moira 2nd had informed her of.

That did not mean entering the hangar beyond the door. From what she had seen during the day, there was no passageway leading underground inside the hangar.

…And even if there is, Typhon will be guarding it.

Also…

"Moira 2nd was not in the hangar to begin with. If she came from the basement, she must have circled around outside first. And the hangar has no back entrance, so there's only one likely place for an entrance to the basement."

That would be the western wall of the building.

Why am I doing this? she wondered as she picked up her pace.

She had received some uncertain information from the automaton who had been completely unsociable up to that point. It was possible her pointing finger had been a complete coincidence.

"But it might not have been a coincidence."

She recalled the smile on Moira 2nd's face before she had been crushed.

…That made up for being unsociable before.

Once she turned the corner, she would find the row of potted plants along the south side of the building. The maids who had taken those flowers' names were cleaning on the upper floors. The singing from above was proof of that.

"They're all working together, so I shouldn't be down here acting on my own like this."

She turned the corner and immediately found someone standing in her way.

"You."

She knew the person very well.

"Moira 1st."

"Yes, Lady Miyako."

Moira 1st raised her skirt a bit, curtsied, and turned a smile in Miyako's direction.

"Where are you going?"

"To the basement."

"Would you like to explain why you are doing this without telling us?"

"Nope."

Moira 1st tilted her head at that.

"Why would you say that? You are attempting to search out our Gear's secrets without telling us. Does that not make you feel guilty?"

Miyako gave a quick answer to that: she laughed.

"Ha ha. No, it doesn't, Moira 1st. Stop testing me already. I'm not afraid to do what I need to anymore. I want to know more about 3rd-Gear and I'm willing to force my way into anything as long as it isn't personal."

"Are you turning against us?"

"No, this is my natural right. And if you really have accepted me, then I have to be able to do this without saying a thing. If I feel the need to ask you about it, it means I don't trust you. If we really do trust each other, we should be able to come to an agreement even if I force my way into something I shouldn't have seen. We can agree to keep it a secret."

She took a breath and stepped toward Moira 1st.

"If this isn't a test, then move out of the way. There's something I have to know."

"Even if knowing it will lead to pain and fear?"

Miyako continued walking forward as she answered.

"If that's what 3rd-Gear is, I have to know. Knowing is more important than pain or fear."

"…"

"And afterwards, we can try to come up with a way to get rid of that pain and fear. You won't say it, but I can more or less tell that 3rd-Gear strayed from the humane path even more than I've heard. That's why you now treat people with almost excessive care. But you also think you can't coexist with Low-Gear, don't you?"

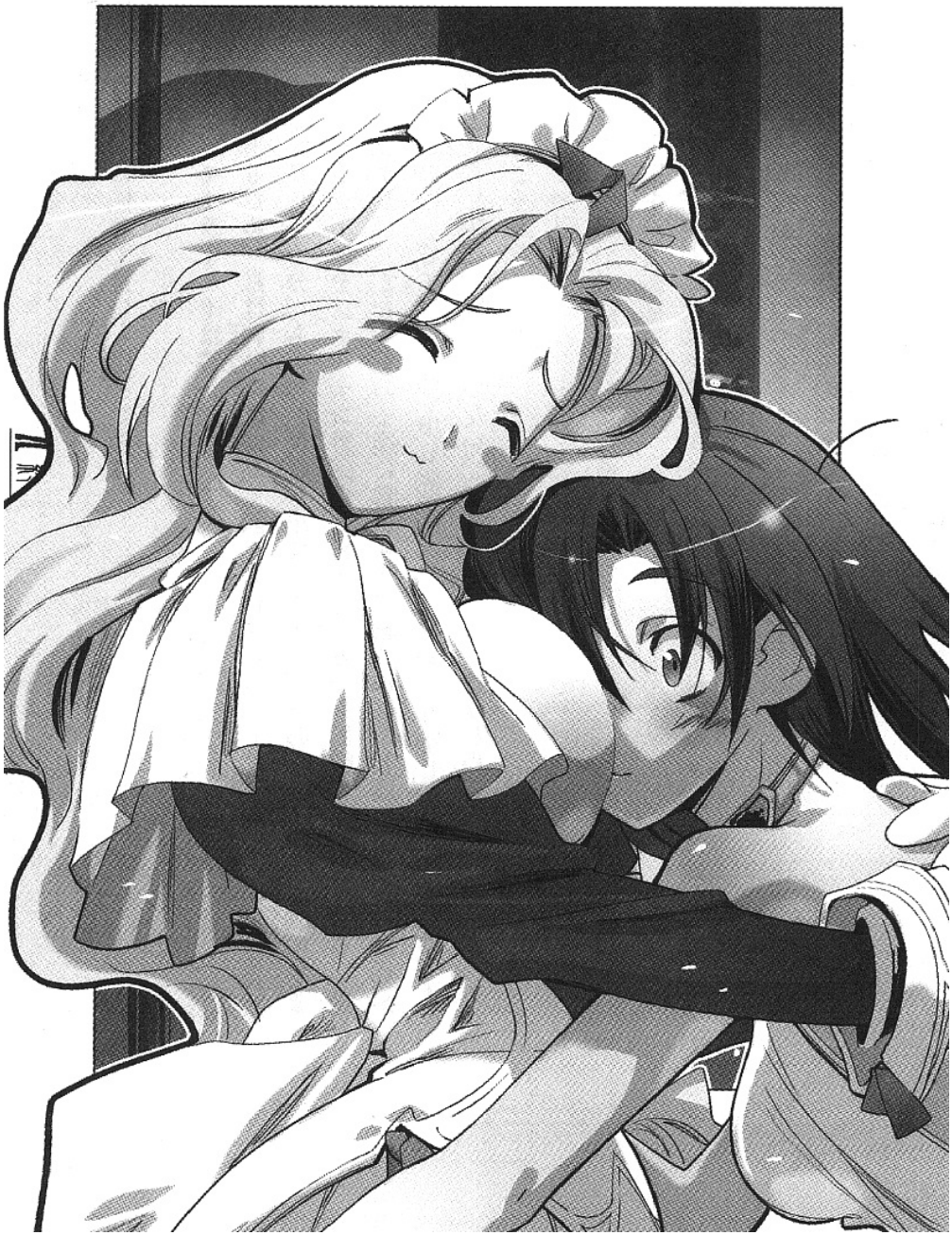
She now stood before Moira 1st.

"I may be stupid, but I can tell that much. And since I'm stupid, I still want to get along with you."

As she spoke, Miyako gave a mental groan.

…That sounds like something a teenage boy would say.

What she wanted to say was much simpler.



“Move, Moira 1st. There’s something I need to see.”

As soon as she said that, sudden movement reached her body. It came from the unexpected action of another.

“!”

A resilient mass wrapped in cloth pressed against her cheek. Two objects that felt like slender resilient rods wrapped around her back and pulled her forward.

It took her a few seconds to realize Moira 1st had hugged her.

“Ah… Hey, what do you think you’re doing?”

“I apologize, Lady Miyako. I cut off my shared memory, so do not worry.”

“What do you mean don’t worry?”

“This was on a whim.” Moira 1st laughed. “I apologize for pressing myself up against you, but this is the first time I have determined it would be best to leave all of my authority with someone else.”

“What?”

“As I am the leader, the standards for my decisions are set rather high when it comes to entrusting myself to another. That leads to a fairly large reaction when it does happen, so…well… I apologize.”

“You’re calling that rich boy pathetic while also secretly saying something pretty risqué, you know that?”

“A-am I? But even though I have made this decision for the lower maids before, this is the first time to do so for myself. Lady Miyako, I apologize, but please stay like this for a moment.”

Her tone made it clear Miyako’s opinion did not matter here. This was rare for Moira 1st.

She must really want to do this, thought Miyako. *And I can’t let anyone else see this.*

“Well, being the leader must be tough.”

“Thank you for your concern.”

Miyako heard another laugh and then pulled away from Moira 1st.

…Her body has some hard parts, but she’s got pretty large breasts. If there was a mold for these maids, hers would probably be expensive.

While wondering if she had lost or not, she looked at Moira 1st. The maid had her eyes closed and almost appeared to be asleep.

…Does she feel relieved?

That was the expression anyone, even children, gave when feeling relief.

…If this is the first time this has happened…

Miyako recalled that Moira 1st was thousands of years old and felt she needed to say something.

"Well, it's fine if…um…hm."

…How should I put this? No, it's the attitude that matters.

She reached out her left hand and lightly embraced Moira 1st's back. She felt the automaton trembling a bit, so she gently stroked her as if soothing a cat.

"You've been through a lot, haven't you?"

While still stroking Moira 1st's back with her left hand, she placed her right hand on the maid's head. She felt it was a waste to place her fingers in that thin yet plentiful hair, but she stroked her head all the same.

"Whenever the stress builds up, you can come to me if you want. If you don't, you'll just keep wearing yourself out."

"Yes."

Moira 1st nodded and the strength in her arms lessened on Miyako's back.

…Is that all she needs to make up for thousands of years?

She almost asked if Moira 1st was holding back, but she stopped. If she asked that, Moira 1st would likely move away prematurely, so she instead kept her arm on the maid's back and continued stroking her head.

"U-um, if you do this too much, it would not be fair to the lower maids."

"I gave them names, but you three didn't take one because you already had Moira as a name. You can think of this as a release to make up for that."

"A release?"

"That's when you finally let something out after holding it in for a long time. …And I don't mean that in a dirty way."

Moira 1st laughed at that and strength left her body.

She then moved away.

After taking a step back, her expression had returned to normal and she bowed.

“I apologize for letting you see something so disgraceful.”

“I’m always way more disgraceful than that,” said Miyako. “And more importantly, move out of the way. I’ve got somewhere to go.”

“I cannot do that.”

“Why not?”

Miyako frowned, but Moira 1st gave her usual smile.

“The door to the basement weights five hundred kilograms. We can open it with our gravitational control, but can you do that without my help, Lady Miyako?”

Chapter 28

“Confrontation of Discovery”

What is it called when your eyes meet?
Or is it what happens next that matters?
Eyes speak despite not uttering words

●

A pale green light could be seen in the darkness and someone stood before it.

The person was Miyako.

She was in 3rd-Gear's basement and the light was located in the center.

"Is this the remote control for the gods of war?"

She had come this far using that light.

Moira 1st had opened the way to this giant underground storehouse. God of war parts and automaton parts were stored inside hard packaging and some packages were labelled as food.

Miyako belatedly realized what it meant for the maids to use ingredients bought outside rather than the food stored down below. She gave a nod of silent thanks and looked around once more.

…I saw a large area of darkness north of the entrance.

"I should probably check over there."

As she began to walk, her eyes adjusted to the darkness enough to notice something before tripping over it or running into it.

She then saw something.

"?"

The large object lay collapsed in the darkness.

"Is that a god of war?"

Her muttered question quickened her pace.

After two or three more steps, she started jogging and she soon began to run.

She brushed her hair back and arrived at the object. It was indeed a god of war. It was covered in pale blue armor, the frame was large, and the armor plates were thick.

"Why does it seem so similar to Typhon?"

She noticed the god of war had been sliced in two.

The collapsed body's torso had been split by a shallow diagonal strike. When she circled to its back to check on the damage, she noticed something had been ripped out of it. There was only empty space there now.

"Why are these scraps here?"

She approached and attempted to peer into the damaged portion.

She touched the armor and looked into the torn out area. Based

on what she had seen of Typhon, the cockpit should have been there.

…Was the cockpit forcibly removed?

She checked the cut and saw it had only diagonally grazed the bottom of the removed portion. The cockpit itself had likely been unharmed. However, she had learned a bit about gods of war in her time here.

"Any damage to a god of war is returned to the pilot."

If the torso was sliced this spectacularly, the pilot would have died.

"So why did they bother keeping it here?"

She noticed something odd while peering into the damaged area.

…Huh?

She wondered what it was and then spoke her thoughts aloud.

"It's so deep."

That was it. The hole was oddly deep.

She looked up and checked the damage again. The hole was about three meters deep. She could tell a single block had been removed because the internal frame had a smooth surface meant to carry something.

The back also had a frame meant to support the cockpit.

"It must have stuck out of the back quite a bit."

She checked and the god of war's back was indeed made to jut out.

She recalled Typhon's back. It had not been as noticeable because of its wings, but it had jutted out about the same.

"Huh?"

She remembered something else about the day. Moira 3rd had said the other gods of war were made to be remotely controlled without altering the cockpit.

She had seen their backs when running across the catwalk.

"But they weren't as thick."

An odd feeling filled her chest.

She realized it was unease. It was the unease of facing something she could not predict.

She shuddered at that realization and began to take a step back.

"…?"

But the pale blue armor panel reacted when she removed her left

hand. A small area on the armor lowered slightly and then rose back up. By the time she realized it was a switch, light had appeared underneath her left hand.

Writing scrolled across the armor. She did not recognize the green characters, but she could read it.

“Preparing to activate.”

The appearance of the writing was accompanied by a minute trembling in the pale blue god of war. It was beginning to start up.

More writing scrolled by as if continuing the startup process.

“Primary pilot: Unknown. Inactive.”

It had no cockpit, so that was hardly surprising.

However, the writing did not end there. It vanished and new characters appeared.

“Standard Copilot: ”

Miyako gasped when she saw the name it displayed. This was why the cockpit block had been so deep.

…It had two pilots! And that name!?

But at that point, the text was rewritten.

“Deleted.”

“Hey!” she shouted futilely.

Both the writing and the trembling vanished.

Darkness and silence returned, leaving nothing behind.

She took a step back in that darkness as if to move away from the craft before her eyes.

When she did, her back touched something.

She bumped into someone standing behind her.

“…!?”

As soon as strength filled her shoulders, a hand was placed on one of those shoulders.

●

The ocean roared below the moon.

Two people walked lightly through the waves on the edge of that noise.

One wore a shirt and chino pants while the other had long hair and wore a short-sleeved shirt and culottes. The one in chino pants brushed up his slicked-back hair.

“Shinjou-kun, is this your first time playing in the waves?”

"Yes," replied Shinjou with a nod.

She held sandals in one hand while avoiding the approaching waves, chasing the receding waves, and sometimes giving a faint cry when she intentionally let the water wash over her feet.

"This is my first time doing this, Sayama-kun. Ah, I'm already so wet."

Is that so? thought Sayama. *I need to save that comment for future use.*

A large wave broke and almost reached their feet. Shinjou laughed and clung to him as the wave chased her.

She did not hesitate to grab his arm, so he silently spoke to the ocean.

…I must thank nature.

He then looked at the arm Shinjou held and saw the thick bundle of copy paper in his hand.

He suddenly realized she was looking him in the eye and that her joy had changed to calm.

"U-um, sorry about getting excited on my own like that. …Have you been thinking about what we discussed earlier?"

"Yes," he answered while thinking back.

Shinjou was referring to the meeting they had held during their post-dinner free time. The main force of Team Leviathan had borrowed one of the boy's tents and looked over the documents from earlier that day.

They had primarily communicated through writing to make sure no one outside the tent could hear them and Hiba had taken part. Mikage had not left the girl's tent, so she had not joined them.

"Everyone had documents they could read and those they couldn't, didn't they?"

"Kazami could read the fewest because she has the weakest connection to any other Gear. Sibyl-kun also remained silent, but she did appear to look through most of the documents."

Sayama held up the documents after moving them to his left hand so Shinjou would not have to let go of his arm.

He flipped through them with his fingers and folded them open with a flick of his wrist.

"During the early stages of World War Two, the National Defense Department was aware of 1st through 8th. They had too little

information on 9th and 10th and they decided to postpone dealing with 5th and 7th. 5th was the world of aerial mechanical dragons, so they wanted to wait until they developed a corresponding weapon. 7th simply rejected their gates, so there was nothing they could do."

"And so the main force of the National Defense Department dealt with 1st through 4th, 6th, and 8th."

Shinjou looked at the documents in his hand.

He stopped walking and held them up so she could see and so the moonlight reached the writing.

She gave a breath of laughter.

"You can actually read by moonlight here. That only occasionally happens in Akigawa."

"Rather than saying it is always like that here, it would be better to say this is the normal state of the world."

She nodded and began reading the text.

"1942, National Defense Department Primary Representative, Izumo Zen, Age 27, Lieutenant, 6th-Gear.

"Technology Division Director, Ooshiro Hiromasa, Age 36, Lieutenant, 2nd-Gear.

"Guard Division Director, Hiba Ryuutetsu, Age 23, Sergeant Major, 3rd-Gear.

"Special Division Director, Sayama Kaoru, Age 25, Lieutenant, 4th-Gear."

Her voice slowed on the next line.

"Special Division Assistant Director…Shinjou Kaname, Age 24, Warrant Officer, 8th-Gear."

And she continued normally from there.

"Adviser, Siegfried Zonburg, Age 27, Lieutenant, 1st-Gear.

"Adviser, Kinugasa Tenkyou, Age 64. He was not in charge of any Gear."

"Even if they held official positions, it appears they were mostly a field operation team with special abilities. They were a small number of elites, much like us now."

"Should we really praise ourselves like that?"

"Judging yourself accurately is a good thing, Shinjou-kun."

Sayama flipped through the documents and found something like a chronology.

It was a record of Shinjou Kaname's 8th-Gear. It had likely been

handwritten to begin with, but the writing lacked any personality because it had been digitized and printed out.

Even so, it was important information. The text said 8th-Gear's life forms were made up of completely different bodily tissues than those of Low-Gear. The report said they appeared no different from stone.

"8th sounds like it was a peaceful Gear," commented Shinjou. "That's kind of surprising."

"If a creature's scale of time is different, it will take part in a war differently. Between a Gear of people and a Gear of stone, the latter will be forced to act primarily as onlookers. The records say much the same about 4th-Gear which was populated by plants. While it was not to the same extent as Low-Gear, those two Gears were not seen as enemies or were at least put off until the later stages of the Concept War."

"This Shinjou and your grandfather were probably trying to grasp the true state of the Concept War by approaching 4th and 8th."

Sayama felt pain in his chest as he recalled the records of his grandfather, but his right hand contained the documents and his left was taken up by Shinjou. *I must endure,* he told himself before taking a breath.

"The scene does not suit my grandfather. 4th-Gear was a world where three rings of land intersected. The sun was located in the center and the inner walls of the rings contained flowing rivers. Was that old man dreaming?"

"I'm sure it really existed. …It said your grandfather had trouble speaking with Tree Serpent Mukiti because of how long it took." She smiled bitterly. "It apparently took several hours for a single response, so it later evolved more high-speed plants."

"It must have been that experience which made that monkey so short-tempered. Anyway, it is a shame none of the records go beyond the National Defense Department days."

"Yes. We don't know what happened to Shinjou Kaname."

She reached out and flipped through the documents.

The 8th-Gear document ended partway through and had the following written at the bottom.

"July 21, 1945. I have requested that Sayama Kaoru continue the investigation."

“It seems he fell ill. The 4th-Gear document says this: starting July 25, I will begin investigating 8th-Gear in place of Shinjou Kaname who has been hospitalized.”

“I wonder if those two got along.”

“Who can say? But this Shinjou Kaname may have been your grandfather or another relative.”

“We can’t know that.”

Her expression was perfectly serious and she seemed to be speaking to herself more than anyone.

“We shouldn’t get our hopes up. Shinjou is a pretty common name and this is from over sixty years ago. If he was 24 in 1942, he would be around 87 now. That would put him around 70 when I was born. You can fit two generations in between.”

“And if a daughter was born even once, the Shinjou name would not continue on.”

“Yes. Also, I’ve felt short-lived joy at seeing the name Shinjou several times in the past,” she added. “Still, I wonder what happened to him. It says he was hospitalized and we know he was with the National Defense Department but not UCAT, right? So what if his illness…”

“Even if that is the case, you are still here, Shinjou-kun.”

Shinjou trembled at that and he spoke directly to the gaze below her lowered eyebrows.

“Whether something happened or not, I am looking at you now, so do not worry.”

“…Right.”

She lowered her head before suddenly speaking up.

“Oh. S-Sayama-kun!”

She frantically called his name and touched the left side of his chest.

“What is it, Shinjou-kun?” he asked when he felt the touch of her hand. “Why the sudden chest-groping heart massage? If you are going to do this, go bolder and more sensitive!”

“Stop making about three leaps of logic at once! …U-um, we’ve been talking about your grandfather this whole time, so does your chest hurt?”

He had been ignoring the pain.

“No? I am perfectly fine.”

“Don’t do that. I don’t want you to hurt.”

“I get the feeling you have not been listening to me recently.”

“Eh?” She tilted her head and looked up into the sky as if thinking on his words. “W-well, that makes two of us.”

She took a breath and looked around to make sure no one else was around.

“What is it, Shinjou-kun?”

“Oh, well… I was just thinking we’d come a long way.”

“We have. We might be on the opposite side from the camp.”

The distant lights were no longer from Shikoku. They were from the north.

“That is the Kojima peninsula. The light from the Mizushima industrial complexes is quite orderly. Also, another island seems to continue on beyond it, but that is likely from the Great Seto Bridge. We could not see it during the day, but the light must make it show up at night.”

“I see…”

Shinjou sounded disinterested as she looked in the direction he pointed.

“Is there something you want to say?” he asked her.

“Eh? Um, yes.”

She lightly held her body through her shirt and looked around again.

“This is just between the two of us, but you said you are looking at me now, remember?”

She averted her gaze as she spoke.

She slowly relaxed her arms and reached for her clothes.

A moment later, her culottes slid down her legs and to the sandy beach.

She blushed as she looked back at him, but then she smoothly undid the buttons on the chest of her shirt.

“It’s not because you said that…but will you look at me?”

With that, her white shirt fell from her shoulders.

●

Below the moon was a large white-walled building.

Three people could be seen by its southern wall. They were all female and two of them faced the third.

That third one wore a red suit and faced forward. Her sharply narrowed eyes first turned toward the one with blonde hair and a maid uniform. She opened her lips which were covered in red lipstick.

"Moira 1st, do you understand what you have done? Many secret items are located down below and you allowed in an outsider."

"Yes, I understand, Lady Gyes. However, it was what Lady Miyako desired."

Gyes turned to the right and toward Tsukuyomi Miyako, the black-haired woman standing next to Moira 1st.

She looked her in the eye and Miyako frowned as she looked back.

…Surely she knows she is no match for my combat abilities.

Gyes did not understand, but this was a favorable situation for a combat automaton.

However, she kept that hidden and spoke to Moira 1st once more.

"Did you say that to pin the blame on Tsukuyomi Miyako here?"

"No."

Moira 1st responded immediately and Miyako frantically looked up, but Moira 1st continued with a smile before the woman's look of protest could lead to words.

"My decisions are my responsibility. I helped Lady Miyako because that was what I wished to do. I did it for myself."

"Are you saying you now have a designated master? You have worked for anyone's sake for millennia as the leader of the Moirai, but you have chosen this woman after only a few days?"

"Yes."

She smiled as she answered and that expression told Gyes that her ability to form expressions had grown constant. Gyes thought about why that would be.

…Oh.

"Moira 1st, you hold a position different from Lord Apollo's 3rd-Gear, don't you?"

Gyes pulled a sword from her suit and Miyako reflexively stepped in front of Moira 1st with her arms spread.

"What the hell are you doing!? Aren't you on the same side!?"

Gyes frowned and looked to Miyako.

“That is exactly why I must do this. A machine that has lost sight of its objective must be disposed of or displayed in a museum. And Moira 1st, why do you not stand in front of this woman? If she is your master, it is your duty to protect her.”

“It is, but I am happy that Lady Miyako would stand in front of me.”

“Automatons cannot feel ‘happy’.”

“But we can make associations. Automatons are machines, but we understand it is worthwhile for our master to draw out more of our own functionality and to treat us with care so that we might last longer. From there, we only need to associate happiness with smiles and the actions we take to confirm our master’s existence.” She continued to smile. “If we do that enough, our trust in our master rises and we should be constantly happy.”

“So did you hug me earlier because that trust gauge overflowed?”

“Y-you are not supposed to mention that, Lady Miyako.”

Moira 1st placed her hands on Miyako’s shoulders from behind.

“Now,” she said as she finally moved forward. “Thank you very much for your concern, Lady Miyako. That was more than enough. I will handle the rest.”

“Is that so?”

Gyes watched as Miyako stepped back with a reluctant expression.

“Don’t look at me like that. When she says that, what choice do I have but to let her handle it?”

“Are you jealous, Lady Gyes?”

“I have no such emotion. Also, we have been treated with plenty of care since Lord Apollo awoke five years ago. I have no complaints.”

“Yes, but Lord Apollo does not have us do anything. Do you never want to remove the curse placed on him?”

“Do not say that, Moira 1st!” shouted Gyes on reflex.

However…

“It is no use. Lady Miyako has already realized there is a mystery surrounding Lord Apollo.”

It can’t be, thought Gyes just before hearing Miyako’s voice.

“Are Typhon and the god of war in the basement related to why that rich boy can’t leave here?” She took a breath and scratched

her head. “When I checked Typhon’s back today, I saw a name on the cockpit console. It said Artemis. But the Artemis I saw was obviously some kind of ghost walking through the building. I doubt she could be piloting Typhon. Also…the console for the god of war in the basement gave Artemis’s name as the copilot.”

“And what do you say this means?”

“How should I know? I’m not smart enough to come up with an answer right away. But the god of war in the basement and Typhon both have a connection to the name Artemis. Also, there are some odd things about Typhon.” She folded her arms and looked to Gyes. “When Moira 2nd was crushed, I looked at Typhon again and noticed something. The forehead and right arm were being repaired today. Those are the same places Apollo was injured when he fell from the cliff yesterday. What’s up with that?”

She received a single response.

“————”

Gyes began to move.

Her mechanical mind had determined this was dangerous. One of 3rd-Gear’s secrets lay there.

…That secret is necessary for 3rd-Gear’s continued existence!

If it was discovered, the foundation they served would grow unstable.

“You have learned too much!”

The attack was a straight jab. The silver line tore through the air and split the darkness of the night.

“!”

However, the sound it produced was not that of pierced flesh or breaking bone.

It was a metallic noise.

Gyes realized the sword in her hand had broken.

Why? she wondered, but the answer was directly before her.

Something had stabbed into the ground between her and Miyako.

“My sword.”

Her implied question was answered by a deep male voice.

“Have you forgotten the promise you made with Low-Gear? You promised to speak with them if they placed this sword where they think our base is.”

She sensed two people behind her.

“Aigaion and…”

“Moira 3rd!” announced the smaller maid.

“What are you two doing here?”

“I’d like to know that too.” Miyako shrugged. “I get that the rich boy has something going on, but what is it? How are the god of war in the basement and Typhon binding that idiot?”

“Why do we have to tell you?”

“What if Lord Apollo actually wants this, Lady Gyes?”

“What?”

Gyes frowned and Moira 1st nodded.

“When he shouted at Lady Miyako yesterday, it was the first time I had seen such powerful emotions in him for a long time. I believe it was the first time since he awoke and left Typhon five years ago. That is something we could not produce in him in those five years.”

“I do not want to make my master shout in displeasure!”

But Moira 1st only spoke with a peaceful smile.

“I am sorry, Lady Gyes, but Lord Apollo was smiling after that argument. And that was not the smile we have seen for these five years. It was the same smile he would give before 3rd-Gear began to struggle in the Concept War. That is what I have determined.”

Automatons could not lie, so that had to be the truth.

…Did this woman remind Lord Apollo of feelings we were unable to give him?

“Why were you able to drag a smile out of Lord Apollo?”

Miyako stepped forward with a frown and tilt of the head.

“Drag a smile out of him? What do you mean?”

“Have you not realized despite being the one to argue and smile with him? We have spent five years with him and yet were unable to give him a natural smile. He often smiles, but the movement patterns of his facial muscles show that there is no strength behind those smiles.”

“Maybe your service is just really bad. Maybe he can’t smile because you’re too awkward.”

“Um, Lady Miyako, that is actually our job,” protested Moira 1st.

“Sorry, sorry.”

The corners of Miyako’s mouth twisted as she further approached Gyes.

She was already at close range. If Gyes drew her sword, the

others could not stop her in time, but there was something she had to ask first.

"Human, how did you give Lord Apollo that expression?"

"That's easy. I hit his head too hard and knocked a screw loose."

"Damn you!"

Gyes reached toward her back and into her suit, but she saw that Miyako had already leaned backwards.

"Headbutt!"

The headbutt struck Gyes right on the forehead.

The attack caught her completely by surprise. She had not switched to combat mode, so her only defenses were the defensive membrane of her skin and her skeletal structure. Unfortunately, the defensive membrane was not enough to suppress the vibration.

"…!"

The vibration reached her artificial skull and her brain sensed danger. She shut down her wiring to prevent the vibration from sending random commands through her nervous system. It only took an instant to reconnect, but she could not move in the intervening time.

She collapsed as if her knees had given out.

The reconnection succeeded a moment later and she regained her senses of sight, hearing, and touch.

"Ah…"

But Miyako was holding her by the collar and the woman's empty left hand was pressed against her own forehead.

"That rich boy is quite something if he was smiling after taking blow after blow like that. Tell me, Gyes. What is his secret?"

"Why? Why do you want to know so badly?"

"It's nothing much."

Miyako averted her gaze and frantically spoke up when she noticed Moira 1st peering at her from the side.

"Oh, but…um…I don't mean it's nothing. There is something. It's just…"

"Yes? What is it?"

"Well… You know that rich boy's eye color? That yellow? Typhon sometimes has that same eye color, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does," answered Gyes. "Although only for a short time."

Hearing that, Miyako looked relieved. Her shoulders lowered,

she took a breath, and she looked at the others.

"Listen. Don't tell anyone about this. …To be honest, I don't really get it myself, but I feel like that eye color is really important to me."

"What do you mean? If you want that eye color, you can change yours by- That's just cruel, big sister!!"

After watching Moira 3rd being carried away, Miyako turned back to Gyes.

"Answer me this," she started. "Did that rich boy always have that look to his eyes? Y'know…that weak one."

"No. That appeared when 3rd-Gear began turning its people into gods of war to fight and he was left all alone."

"I see. What was that idiot like before then?"

"He was strong. He was kind and meant to become a king, but… that was taken from him."

"Why?"

"He was killed by the traitor's daughter and a member of your Gear. The god of war from below is a remnant of that."

"That doesn't make any sense. Apollo was killed? But that idiot's alive."

Gyes did not answer, but Miyako continued speaking.

"So is that the curse? Is something keeping him alive while also binding him? Is that what's moving Typhon and keeping him from leaving here!?"

What could that something be?

"Is it Artemis!?"

As soon as she shouted that name, she heard a noise. It was a low groan that almost sounded like the earth trembling.

"The hangar door."

Aigaion's comment led her to turn east where the forest was now lit up. The hangar door was opening and someone appeared from the light within.

"Artemis!"

That woman of light exited the hangar.

Her gentle movements resembled dancing as she floated atop the grass in front of the hangar.

Her expression was near tears, she held herself in her arms, the wind blew her hair, and she looked up into the sky.

The moon was there.

She opened her mouth and let out a voice that took the form of a shout and a scream.

“————————!”

However, that tremendous scream came from within the hangar and a giant white form soon followed the sound out.

It was Typhon.

As they all held their breath, Typhon came to a stop behind Artemis.

The white, six-winged god of war reached for Artemis and lifted her on its palm.

It looked to the sky. The giant’s eyes were pale and those eyes were turned upwards where the moon floated in the night sky.

Typhon placed Artemis on its shoulder and roared once more.

“————————!”

With that deep mechanical voice, the white giant flew into the sky.

It left noise and wind behind.

“!”

Gyes covered her eyes amid the gust of wind, but she still saw Miyako continuing to hold her collar and looking up into the night sky.

The wind blew leaves into the air, but only the moon was visible in the sky.

“Is Apollo inside Typhon?” asked Miyako.

Gyes took several seconds to conclude that question had been directed at her.

But before she could reply, Miyako asked again.

“He is, isn’t he, Gyes?”

“Why?”

“Why what? You aren’t making sense.”

“That does not matter. Answer me, human. Why do you put so much focus on Typhon?”

“Well,” muttered Miyako as she looked up into the night sky. “I used to be strong, just like Apollo. And recently, I realized something. The truth is, I was also weak back then and I’m also strong now. It was that eye color that led me to that realization.”

Miyako nodded.

“Yes, that’s what it is.” She let go of Gyes’s collar. “And that’s

why I'm so interested in those eyes. I want to know if there's something I can do, even if it's unwanted."

"…"

The word "regret" appeared in Gyes's mind.

Just as Moira 1st had said, she was associating Miyako's words with her own desires.

It was unclear if Miyako had realized it or not, but Gyes's assessment of Apollo was the same as Miyako's assessment of herself.

That would mean something had happened to Miyako that was similar to what had happened to Apollo.

"Miyako, are you closer to him than any of us despite the difference in Gear and the short time you have known him?"

Miyako did not look Gyes's way, so the automaton got up and stood next to the woman.

"Let's go."

"What's this all of a sudden? Go where, you idiot?"

"To pursue Typhon. When Typhon goes on a rampage, it is our duty as the Hecatoncheires to stop it. And while we are at it, we will let you see it all. So come with us. And…" She nodded. "If you still wish to do something after seeing this, I will choose to trust you!"

●

Black hair danced in the moonlight.

That color black was sent dancing by the girl playing in the waves while wearing a white swimsuit.

As the waves washed up to above her knees, she swept it away with her hands, slowly circled around, and otherwise enjoyed herself. Her movements waved her black hair about and the dark spray of water reached her skin and the white cloth covering her chest and lower body.

When she spoke, her voice was filled with surprise and delight.

"Ha ha! The bottom really is cold at night, Sayama-kun."

She turned toward the boy who sat on the beach.

Baku sat on his head and Shinjou's shed clothing was untidily placed next to him.

He had one knee raised as he watched her.

"Are you enjoying the ocean, Shinjou-kun?"

“Yes. I’m glad I came.”

終わりのクロニクル

She collapsed into the water, but a wave crashed down above her before her back hit the water. She sank into the unexpected cold and pressure of the water.

"Wah!"

She frantically stood up and brushed up her slightly damp hair.

That was pathetic, she thought while turning toward Sayama.

She spread her arms as if showing off her body.

"How do I look? I was afraid white wasn't all that different from underwear or our combat uniforms."

"Never fear, Shinjou-kun. Swimsuits are an entirely different genre. You look wonderful."

"Since you didn't make any strange comments, I'm really glad to hear that."

However, she began to hold her body with a troubled look. She was feeling a bit cold now that she had been soaked with water.

…It actually feels less cold when in the water.

She found that strange as she scooped up the waves and splashed the water over her skin.

"Waves are so very strange, Sayama-kun. I wonder how they work."

"The wind and the flow of the tides move the water and the continual overlapping movements become repeated waves."

"That answer kind of ruins the mood…"

But what made her smile was not what he said but how quickly he gave the answer.

That smile produced a question from him as he buried Baku in the beach such that only his head stuck out.

"Did I say something funny?"

"No. I was thinking about how you have a response no matter what I say."

"I am only this verbally generous when it comes to you, Shinjou-kun."

"Thanks, but it can't just be with me." She narrowed her eyes as she spoke. "This may not be exactly what I truly think…but even if I'm no longer with you, you have to continue the Leviathan Road and continue speaking."

"How ominous. You should avoid saying that sort of thing."

"Why? Low-Gear has no concept that makes words come true."

“Perhaps not, but my mother said we were going to meet someone important and then she alone went to meet that person.”

His face looked white in the moonlight, but Shinjou spotted his right hand on his chest.

…Ah.

She realized her words had taken them in an unintentional direction.

She frantically moved toward him in order to take his hand in the moonlight, to see each other’s faces better, and to eliminate the misunderstanding faster than words could.

But the sandy ground was loose after being torn into by the waves and a receding wave tugged at her feet.

Meanwhile, Sayama spoke.

“Also, the automaton known as #4 defined her own death and truly did die once that definition was fulfilled.”

His hand remained on his chest.

“And yet there is no concept giving words power.”

“That’s…”

She tried to add “not true” as she crossed the waves. She did not know about his mother, but she could comment on #4.

“That can’t be true. Sayama-kun, if you try to carry everything yourself, you’ll- Ah!”

The receding wave caused the sand below her feet to crumble and she tripped forward.

The water was only knee deep, but a wave crashed down from above and she sank down to the bottom. The warm water and sound around her hands, elbows, and knees was pulled back toward her butt and it tickled.

She quickly got up and sat on the sandy ground below the water.

“Ah.”

She spat out the salt water in her mouth. The water in her eyes stung, but rubbing her eyes would not help. She shook water from her hair while a new wave hit her on the waist and then receded.

Once she raised her head and opened her eyes, she found Sayama standing directly before her.

…Ah.

He had entered the ocean up to shin height with his shoes and everything still on. He was as expressionless as ever and Baku sat

on his head.

"Are you okay, Shinjou-kun? There are rocks and shells on this beach, so do you have any cuts?"

"I-I'm fine, but your pants and shoes…"

"Do not worry." He took a shallow breath. "This happened immediately after I made an odd comment. It would have been a much bigger deal had something happened to you."

Shinjou realized what he meant by that.

…What happened with his mom and #4 means a lot to him.

She wanted to tell him to stop thinking like that, but she knew it would not be that easy.

Instead, she reached out a hand toward his right hand. That was the hand he always used to hold the left side of his chest.

She grabbed the hand and tugged it toward her.

"Let's stay together forever."

It took several seconds for him to reply, but he did finally nod.

His expressionless face changed to a small smile and he spoke.

"Saying it once merely cancels out what you said before, Shinjou-kun."

"Th-then I'll say it twice: let's stay together forever. If you want, I can say it a third or fourth time."

"Is that so?"

He nodded and pulled on her hand to help her stand.

He looked at her wet body and she decided to assume he was checking for injuries. Feeling appreciative, she turned around.

The lights of Okayama were visible there. Beyond that were the lights of the Great Seto Bridge as Sayama had previously explained and lights likely continued on and on the farther back one looked.

"Your parents protected the lights of that city from the Great Kansai Earthquake, didn't they?"

"Rather than protecting them, you should say they allowed them to remain. …Or perhaps they were unable to do even that."

He took a deep breath and looked in the same direction as her.

"My parents were certainly part of IAI and they seem to have been part of UCAT as well, but I do not have much desire to remember how things were back then. A lot happened and the memories I wish to reject are more powerful. But…I think my father was an obedient person, unlike my grandfather."

"…"

"The Great Kansai Earthquake in 1995 creates a dividing point for it all," he said. "The old man said the epicenter was Babel, the ancient tower which contains this world's negative concepts. On that night, my parents were called in to help and my father did not return. My mother would only say he was caught in secondary damages. However…I do not know what really happened."

"Eh?"

He nodded.

"Do you remember what I said earlier today? There is a lot we still do not know about that earthquake. That is what I am talking about. We know what caused the earthquake, but we do not know what caused the activation of the negative concepts."

"W-was it just a coincidence or due to something we don't know about yet?"

"Yes. For example, the interference of the Army or a group that preceded them."

●

Shinjou gasped.

…The interference of the Army or a similar group?

What if the activation of the negative concepts had been an intentional act by some group?

"Would that mean this group activated the negative concepts for some reason? Like to destroy Low-Gear?"

There would have been a battle and the negative concepts had not been fully activated.

"Does that mean your father and the others were trying to stop them?"

"There is no way to be sure because we still lack too much information. We do not know if such a group even existed or if there was a battle around Babel. However…"

"However?"

"Here is an interesting piece of information. On that final night, my father said he had work to do at IAI, left with my mother, and then died when he was sent out to help with the early morning earthquake. In other words, my parents were called in to UCAT before the earthquake actually occurred."

He took a breath and placed his right hand on his chest.

“I wish to look into the records. What positions within UCAT did all those who died from the ‘secondary damages’ hold? If they were all skilled fighters, why were they called in just before the earthquake? Of course, it is possible they were all given the night shift by coincidence.”

“This is all speculation, isn’t it? It’s hard to believe there was some decisive battle between UCAT and an opposing force ten years ago.”

“Yes,” he said with his eyes closed. “We do not have enough information to support or reject that theory. And if this theory is correct, nothing could be more humiliating.”

“Why would it be humiliating?”

He opened his eyes, faced her, and answered with a serious tone.

“It would mean I am fulfilling the Leviathan Road in order to make up for my parents’ inability to fully prevent the activation of the negative concepts in that battle. Also, it would mean there were those in the battle who were truly attempting to destroy Low-Gear. That is exactly the sort of person I wish to defeat in negotiations.”

“I think your desires are straying toward the extreme.”

“I suppose so. But remember that this is only speculation, Shinjou-kun. We will likely learn the truth in the future, but I intend to avoid being trapped by my own imagination and feeling let down when I face the truth. After all, I know that I am the world. The truth found in that world must agree with my thoughts and that is why I wish to make sure that is the case.”

He sighed.

“At any rate, I still do not know what happened back then. All I know is that my father died and my mother grew depressed afterwards.”

That comment led Shinjou to look toward him.

He was lowering his gaze from the lights beyond the ocean and to her.

She met his gaze and had a single thought in her mind.

…No matter what past he might face, I’ll be by his side.

“Yes, it’ll be fine. I’ll be watching you and I’ll do my best to be seen by you.”

She did not say she would outdo his mother or #4. Instead, she

spoke to his expressionless face. She knew he would say nothing more about his feelings now, but…

"If you ever feel like saying more, I'll listen."

He nodded and did not hesitate to wrap his arms around her. Her pulse began to race as she felt her wet skin begin to soak his shirt.

"Ah, Sayama-kun! I'm all wet!"

"I thought we would be together forever."

Before she could reply, his lips touched her forehead. After a moment, his tongue licked her forehead and lowered to her lips.

She closed her eyes as he removed the remaining salt water from her mouth. It was not a bad feeling.

Once she finally let out a breath, he spoke.

"You have a wild salty flavor today, Shinjou-kun. And your swimsuit is wonderfully thin and see-through."

"Please stop saying things in such weird ways. …And what do you mean see-through!?"

She frantically bent back within his arms and looked to her chest.

The truth lay before her eyes. As she blushed, he spoke.

"Some cleverness is needed when wearing a white swimsuit. Did you not know that?"

"No. K-Kazami-san didn't say anything about it."

"She wears swimsuits made of diving suit material, so she would never have to worry about this. Also…"

That last word sounded ominous. She tilted her head and he looked to her clothes on the beach.

"Shinjou-kun, it may be too late, but did you bring any underwear to change into?"

"Eh? I was wearing this below, so…" She came to a sudden realization. "But if I wear those clothes over this, I'll ruin an entire outfit. And I only just changed before dinner."

"I doubt anyone would blame you if you stripped down naked and wore the clothes over your bare skin."

"I don't want to be that unguarded."

"I see. Well, I thought this might happen, so I prepared some underwear for you."

"Where did you steal those from!?"

She could not help but shout out when he pulled underwear from his breast pocket like a magic trick.

However, he shook his head.

“I did not steal it. I bought it as a present for you.”

“Just out of curiosity, where did you buy it?”

“At UCAT’s large-scale store.”

UCAT’s third floor was a market facility. She pictured Sayama spreading out underwear in the lingerie shop while the female employees who shopped there watched him. He of course had Baku on his head.

…I can actually see that happening.

“I want to end that unpleasant image, but how did you know my size?”

“Ha ha ha. That was easy. I am always embracing you, so I was able to use a method my grandfather taught me. I embraced all of the store’s mannequins to determine which one was the same size. It takes a fair bit of effort, but it is the best way to prepare a gift without asking the recipient their size.”

…I can never walk through UCAT’s third floor with him again.

However, he embraced her shoulders.

“Now, let us return to the beach so I can give you your gift. After wiping you dry by hand, I will put the underwear on you.”

“What are you talking about!? Wipe me dry by hand? You’re putting the underwear on me?”

“It is my gift for you, so I must see it through to the end. Can you think of another way of doing that?”

“No, but I can think of some good ways to strangle you.”

“Ha ha ha,” he laughed. “You are being very funny and amicable tonight.”

He thought for a moment and his expression grew perfectly serious.

“You are a truly fucable person, Shinjou-kun.”

“Sayama-kun, do you remember what I said earlier today?”

She decided to strangle him and thought the strap of her swimsuit would work well.

A moment later, a sudden voice reached them from the direction of the tents. It was Kazami.

“Sayama! Shinjou! We’ve got a bit of an emergency! You aren’t doing anything indecent, are you!?”

“Ha ha ha. We were just about to, Kazami. Just watch and-

gwah!”

“W-we weren’t doing anything. Anyway, what is it!?”

Kazami’s panicked voice came from the darkness beyond the beach.

“Well! Mikage is missing!”

“Mikage-san is!?”

Hiba and Izumo burst from the forest with binoculars in hand.

“That’s a big deal!” shouted Izumo.

“No, those two are the bigger deal!” shouted Hiba.

He faced Shinjou who frantically tried to hide her body.

“Wh-why is Shinjou-san a girl!?”

She was unsure what to say when directly asked like that and she thought about whether to explain it.

“Well, um, it would take a while to explain.”

“Don’t tell me you underwent a surgery in Morocco!”

Just as she started to think that would work as a lie, Sayama stepped forward to hide her and then turned to her.

“It would be best to give a quick explanation that eliminates the misunderstanding. …Hiba boy, listen carefully.”

“Y-yes? What is it?”

“People have their own preferences and Shinjou-kun is no different. Try to read between the lines.”

“That does not eliminate the misunderstanding!!”

Shinjou kicked Sayama from behind.

“We need to find Mikage-san!”

Chapter 29

“Ready for a Reunion”

They say they have come for you
But they do not say where they are taking you
Or where they came from

●

The moonlight washed over a wharf.

The short wharf stuck out about ten meters from a rocky area. Enough rocks had been moved to create a path, but no one was using the path at this time of night.

No ships came to the wharf, but a person was visible at the end.

That blonde girl named Mikage sat there while embracing her cane.

She looked up to the moon with her black eyes, the roar of the sea reached her ears, and the sea breeze blew her hair.

“Ow ain.”

How strange.

She had seen the ocean in the past.

“Ohoh ay.”

Tokyo Bay.

Four years before, Hiba’s mother had received some strange papers at a ceremony known as a “neighborhood association drawing”.

She had called them “free passes for Tokyo Melty Land” and the three of them had gone together. Hiba had pushed her in a wheelchair as she had been unable to use a cane at the time. It had a famous attraction known as the Six-Wheel Tyrrell Float in which a moderately melted bipedal mouse that walked on bird legs was forced onwards by the toe-kicking of a dog that was so melted it could only roll along. Hiba had really, really wanted to ride it and caused a commotion when his mother had reported him to the security guards.

Mikage smiled as she remembered that time, but then she lowered her gaze.

“Uh ee.”

The sea.

She had seen a similar expanse of water on the pleasure cruise they had taken back from Melty Land. She had seen several objects floating in that giant and flat area of water and Hiba had called them boats. He had also said boats came in different sizes and types just like gods of war and cars.

“What do you think?” he had said. “The sea really is big, isn’t it?”

She had agreed with that, but the sea before her now was much different.

The dark water had variations in height that pushed in toward land and broke. The wind was also strong.

"I an't oh ohm."

I can't go home.

Back then, there had been a boat in the port, the three of them had eaten, and they had ridden the train home.

…But it's different now.

She did not know why there were no boats.

…I don't like this place.

She did not dislike Kazami or Izumo. If anything, she could relax around them.

She had spent the previous night with Kazami and the girl had gotten up right away if anything happened yet not spoken to Mikage too much. Mikage was especially thankful for how Kazami had learned what Mikage could and could not do after only a quick conversation.

…Some people who think I can't do anything.

But, she thought. *This place is really uncomfortable for some reason.*

She had been fighting alongside no one but Hiba for so long, but this place had a lot of other people who did the same thing.

There had been some things she had thought highly of Hiba for doing, but now she was learning anyone could do them. That realization had brought an odd tightness to her chest.

Also, Hiba was beginning to fit in with them.

At dinner, the tightness in her chest had returned when seeing him speaking with Izumo and the others.

She did not understand what that tightness meant and she could not speak well enough to ask.

On the other hand, he could speak.

At dinner time, she had not spoken with the woman named Ooki who sat across from her or the women named Sibyl and Diana who sat on either side of her. Sibyl had tried to read her lips, but that method did not allow for as quick communication as Hiba or the other people.

It had been frustrating and meaningless, so she had given up on

speaking.

She felt that was selfish, but speaking would not make her feel any less out of place.

Hiba had once said to not reveal her identity if at all possible because it was dangerous while she could not evolve.

"We possess a dangerous power," he had said.

That's not it, she thought. *I'm the one that possesses the destructive weapon of Keravnos.*

"Anerous."

Dangerous.

She understood what that word meant. According to Hiba's grandfather, Keravnos had supplied the finishing blow in destroying 3rd-Gear's king sixty years before. It had been summoned for the first time in order to defeat Zeus.

She had no memory of it, but Keravnos had apparently been a single spear at the time.

…It became three because of my evolution.

Its abilities as a destructive weapon had grown.

Hiba had said they possessed a dangerous power, but he had not realized one thing.

…The dangerous one is me and only me.

Hiba was merely using it.

…And that's why I don't want to lose.

But that too was likely at its end. During the battle earlier in the day, she had learned that he could lose.

"Ee ost."

He lost.

In truth, she still could not believe it. If he lost in a real battle, they would die.

…And it means he lied to me.

She wanted to believe he had simply let his guard down, but she called forth a certain scene from her memories.

She pictured Typhon.

They had run across it twice now and they had twice been overwhelmed by a strange technique. As if they were trying to rush their victory, Typhon had calmly evaded with a teleportation-like technique and then attacked.

Her power as a destructive weapon had not hit that god of war.

She did not know how to defeat it, but losing meant death.

"Ee end."

The end.

This is the end, she told herself while looking up at the moon she had seen countless times before.

"This is the end," she mouthed to the moon.

She had often said to the moon what she could not say to Hiba. When she woke from a bad dream, she would wrap herself in the curtain and speak to the morning moon.

"Ee ah't in."

We can't win.

Typhon was powerful, Hiba could lose, and she was nothing but a destructive weapon.

…I don't need to evolve.

She did not want to see Hiba lose again. She had never before imagined him dying, but she found herself trying to do so now.

…No.

She lowered her head, held her cane to her chest, and trembled atop the wharf, below the moon, and amid the wind and roar of the sea.

She cried silently, but something suddenly stopped her trembling.

"…!"

She heard a roar that drowned out that of the sea.

She looked up and her face was struck by wind that felt like a solid wall, but her eyes did not see the darkness of the night.

A giant white form had appeared within the sudden wind.

It was Typhon.

●

Mikage's eyes opened wide.

…What? Why is Typhon here?

She was able to answer her own question. Keravnos contained half the Concept Core. She was evolving into a human and thus did not have the same ability, but Typhon seemed able to detect the power produced by the Concept Core.

They were near the enemy base, so it would have been easy to detect.

She gasped at that realization and saw the white god of war stand

on the ocean while blowing shimmering heat from its six expanded wings. The ocean's waves were held in place by its gravitational control and its slender feet stood on top of them.

The pale glow of the sight devices on its facial structure looked down on her.

It was looking at her as she held her cane and bent backwards.

However…

"——————"

She twisted her waist and back to crawl face up along the rough concrete of the wharf and toward the ocean.

But she was too slow.

With a metallic noise from overhead, the two swords rising above Typhon's shoulders were automatically removed from their scabbards.

Typhon raised its arms and grabbed each hilt.

Swinging those swords forward would launch twin attacks from above, so Typhon did just that.

"…!"

The god of war cried out while swinging down the swords and it sounded like a woman's scream.

Mikage saw the two silver arcs approaching along with the scream and she tried to call out someone's name.

However, no voice came out.

…I knew it.

Was it all going to end here?

Just as she wondered that, the dropping force of steel reached the wharf.

She realized her body was flying through the night air, but something was odd. The sound of smashing concrete came after she was knocked away.

She wondered why while rapidly dropping.

She then saw two boys standing on the wharf.

"…!?"

They were Sayama and Hiba.

●

Hiba took action while ignoring all else.

Sayama had been the one to find Mikage, but Hiba had been the

first to arrive.

Mikage was crawling on the wharf with her back to him and Typhon stood in the ocean to the left of the wharf.

He only had an instant in which to save her.

When Typhon's arms rose toward the sword hilts, those arms slightly blocked its view. It could still monitor its surroundings with the secondary sight devices, but the identification rate would likely drop.

He charged into that tiny blind spot to draw its attention. If he created even the tiniest opening in Typhon, it would lead to a method of saving Mikage.

…Hurry.

As soon as he thought that, he made an exaggerated charge forward. He practically leaped along the left edge of the wharf to stay just outside the god of war's primary sight devices.

He swiftly attacked.

He now had to see whether Typhon's secondary sight devices would notice him with their low identification rate. If they did, it would need time to double check.

And that was exactly what happened.

Typhon's movements strayed for an instant and the closer sword targeted him.

However, the farther sword continued to target Mikage.

It had two swords and he was just one person, so he could not protect Mikage.

"…!"

Typhon swung down the sword, but Hiba heard a voice.

"I suppose it is my turn."

With that, Sayama charged forward from behind. Even though Typhon had already begun its attack, he did not hesitate to step forward.

…Does he not feel fear?

They had not made any plans together because they had not had the time.

He had simply thought Sayama would do something.

…I hoped he would do something.

But Sayama had kept up with Hiba's speed and understood what he was doing.

What was this trembling deep in Hiba's gut that felt like the embodiment of a threat?

Meanwhile, Sayama took action before Hiba's eyes.

He reached Mikage and did not hesitate or slow. Hiba would have picked her up and taken evasive action while perhaps groping her breast in the process.

"!"

But Sayama pressed the shin of his running right leg against her side and instantly poured in his strength. Rather than kicking her, he gathered strength in his foot and leg in order to lift her up.

She shot into the air as if she had been scooped up and she flew to the right of the wharf. That was the opposite side from Typhon.

If she fell into the ocean with the wharf between, Typhon could not easily reach her. She could not swim, but they would have enough time to rescue her.

Hiba saw Sayama slide forward the leg he had launched Mikage with and then leap. He rushed to the opposite side of the two swords.

Hiba also twisted his body out of the way, but he slipped between the two swords to draw Typhon's attention.

The roar of the sword strikes smashing the wharf played in stereo.

He used his hands to knock aside the concrete fragments flying up from below and he twisted his body further to return the way he had come. By distancing himself from Sayama, Typhon's attention would be divided in two.

While thinking up that tactic, he realized something.

…Why am I so certain of a tactic that includes him even though we didn't discuss it beforehand?

"How strange."

As he continued to wonder why, Typhon made its next move.

This time, it was not a sword strike. Typhon suddenly expanded the base of its wings.

Eight gun barrels extended from its back and light was already leaking from within several of them.

Hiba recognized this light, so he shouted to Sayama who he could not see from his position.

"That must be 3rd-Gear's projectiles! They're probably homing

shots!”

He had seen smaller versions with other gods of war and it seemed Typhon was also equipped with the projectiles.

…The swords weren’t its only weapons!?

He saw pale light. That moonlight color matched Typhon’s eyes.

Hiba began to move. In Susamikado, his reaction speed was increased and the wings provided acceleration, so he was able to evade.

…But how will I fare on my own?

That was when the light arrived.

Typhon let out a roar and light fired from its back as if forming extensions to its wings.

A total of thirty-two beams of blue light filled the night sky. In an instant, they weaved about, crossed paths, and altered trajectory on their way toward Hiba.

And then behind Hiba.

“Eh?”

He took a large step back and looked in the air behind him.

That was the opposite side of the wharf from Typhon and a giant figure had appeared there.

That black god of war was Susamikado.

“Mikage-san!”

As soon as he called her name, all of the light struck the god of war.

●

When Mikage had seen the light on Typhon’s back as she floated in the ocean, she had made up her mind.

…Ryuuji-kun is going to lose again.

This was different from during the day. She could help him on this battlefield.

In that case, how could she help without being a burden while unable to move freely?

…I can be a decoy.

She only needed to call in Susamikado. Typhon seemed to attack any prey before its eyes, so it would likely choose to target its destined enemy if that enemy appeared.

Mikage did not like Susamikado’s power. It protected and

supported her, but it was still a destructive weapon. Hiba wanted her to evolve into a human, but she had a different thought.

…What if Susamikado is strengthened by my evolution?

Susamikado's design was based on the god of war Hiba's grandfather had piloted into 3rd-Gear.

It had been created by Cronus who had been imprisoned by his own son, Zeus.

Keravnos had only been a single spear when it had defeated Zeus, but it was now three spears.

…If that's what it means to evolve, I don't like it.

She felt heat on her back. That meant Susamikado was being summoned.

It began with a thin field of gravitation control that prepared her to be taken inside it. As she floated in the sea, it separated her from the water and lifted her up. She was put in the same position as the inside of the cockpit: knees slightly forward and arms slightly spread.

Next, the body frame appeared behind her. It happened in an instant. After that, the mechanical systems that played the part of internal organs and the nervous system appeared around the frame, but it all happened at once.

Then came the frame and nervous system for the limbs. Artificial muscles and drivers appeared and tens of thousands of bolts in countless different sizes arrived to hold it all in place.

After it all came together and the armor wrapped around it, Susamikado was complete.

However, Mikage did not enter the opened copilot cockpit.

Without Hiba, there would be no point. She could not move Susamikado much on her own.

The god of war's arms were slightly spread, but then it took automatic defensive actions. Regardless of her own thoughts, the control system had sensed danger and taken the bare minimum of defensive actions.

It was defending against the approaching light.

Mikage heard Hiba shout.

"Mikage-san!"

She tried to say she was fine, but no voice came from her mouth.

She saw Typhon emitting the light in the center, Hiba to the left,

and Sayama to the right.

As far as she could see, the two boys were working together. And just like her, they were not speaking.

…Then it will be fine. Ryuuji-kun can get by without me.

She had thought this moment was coming ever since she had first summoned Susamikado five years ago. She had known Hiba would eventually be able to fight without her.

…After all, I'm a destructive weapon. I'm nothing more than that.

She could not move, speak, or provide like the others with him could.

And so she closed her eyes.

●

Sayama saw thirty-two beams of light slam into the black god of war.

Water sprayed into the air and the black armor broke. The initial sprays of water must have weakened the subsequent attacks somewhat because, after the first few, they struck rather than broke the armor.

Nevertheless, the black god of war was blown away.

The armor of the right leg split open and the internal parts came into view. It likely had a lot more damage, but Sayama could not see it because Susamikado had instantly disappeared after bending backwards and falling into the sea.

All that remained in the water were ripples from the falling spray, the swaying waves, and…

"Mikage-san!"

Hiba called out to the girl in a white dress who was rocked by the waves.

"Do not let your guard down, Hiba boy!"

A sword appeared overhead. It was Typhon's giant sword and Sayama was given a good sense of just how large a god of war's blade was.

…But this is an inexperienced strike.

Just like with the previous attack, Typhon fought by slamming its power into its opponent. With half of the Concept Core, its power had to be near infinite. If used well, the god of war would be able to

move about at high speed like Fafnir Custom had.

…So why does it not?

Typhon was said to be piloted by Apollo, son of 3rd-Gear's Zeus. #4 and #8 had both said Apollo should be dead.

"But does that explain why Typhon's attacks are so inexperienced?"

Sayama avoided the sword simply by twisting his body. The blade fell almost vertically, so its path was easy to predict. The blade shattered the concrete, but that was all it did.

"Hiba boy!"

Hiba faced the sea in preparation to jump in, so he did not see the blade descending toward his head.

However, something stopped Typhon's attack on Hiba.

It was a voice. Specifically, a female voice that reverberated through the night sky.

"Apollo!!"

Sayama saw Typhon tremble and stop attacking in response to that name.

…What is going on?

He saw two things happen.

First, Hiba jumped into the sea.

Second, a new god of war landed on the wharf.

The new one was red. It had no arms and instead had six swords floating in the air as if dangling down. Also, it had something on either side of its neck.

"Gyes!?"

Two figures turned toward his voice: Gyes who wore a red suit and a black-haired woman in a white outfit.

He frowned and the two of them were most certainly looking toward him. However, the black-haired woman soon turned toward Typhon.

She has a powerful gaze, thought Sayama. *It looks as if she came here to ascertain something.*

…That is a look of great resolve.

It turned out Typhon was unable to defy her gaze.

"…!"

It instantly raised the two swords, but it did not sheathe them.

Typhon covered its face with both fists and Sayama heard it let

out a cry.

The cry was made with a male voice filled with emotion. The emotion could have been anguish or resentment.

“————!”

A moment later, wind exploded out.

Typhon flew into the sky along with the two swords raised above it.

It moved with such speed that even Sayama could only perceive it as a white afterimage.

Next, the red god of war flew into the air. This one moved more slowly, as if flapping its wings.

As it flew higher, its ascent picked up speed. It seemed to be pursuing Typhon or perhaps travelling to the moon in the heavens.

Once the red god of war disappeared from view, Sayama finally looked back down.

“And this is all that remains.”

He saw only the smashed wharf and Hiba holding Mikage in the sea.

Several lit maglites pointed their way from the rocky area and he heard Shinjou and Kazami calling their names. He ignored Izumo’s voice which was insulting his intelligence.

He sighed as the number of lights and voices grew.

“Were we too late?”

He looked to the ocean, but he could not see Hiba and Mikage very well due to the rocking of the waves and the contrast of the moonlight on the water. However, he could tell Hiba was shouting something.

Seeing that, Sayama muttered to himself.

“No, this may be the perfect time.”

Chapter 30

“Clash of Divulgence”

To say one thing, say two things
To say two things, say three things
But before saying three things, do not let them speak

●

Several shapes of light filled the darkness.

Those lights took the form of two meter tall triangular pyramids and cubes.

Those were the lights of tents and a dozen or so were located in the forest near the sea.

One of those tents split open. It was white and displayed a card labelling it as the “medical tent”. The front of the tent split open and two people exited the light. One was a girl with short hair and the other was a short woman with her black hair tied back.

The girl closed the tent behind her and sighed while the woman pulled out a cigarette to her left.

“Various scrapes and cuts as well as lacerations and contusions to the right leg. It would normally take two weeks for a full recovery, but there are no major external injuries. You have no reason to worry so much, Kazami.”

“But Doctor Chao…”

“It’ll be fine. I went all out on treating her and Sibyl is with her.”

Chao lit the cigarette with a men’s lighter she pulled from her white coat. Kazami could smell gas and see the light of the flame.

“I made sure the injuries will be healed by the time she’s taken to the battlefield. If she’s human, that is.”

“What is she?”

“Well, I’d say she’s human. It’s true some of her body is still mechanical, but it’s fused with the human tissue. Those parts are basically prosthetics that can’t be removed.”

Kazami’s eyebrows rose in surprise when Chao so readily called Mikage human.

“Then she really isn’t an automaton?”

“It’s too early to make that decision, Kazami. Much too early.”

Chao held the cigarette between her lips and the flame instantly moved down to the base.

She dropped the long cigarette butt into a portable ashtray she pulled from her pocket and opened her mouth.

She breathed out a large puff of smoke and she sank into the massive cloud of smoke she herself had produced.

“Ahh, that really stings the eyes. If I don’t do this after working,

I'll lose this stimulation."

"Doctor Chao, you don't have to put on a one-woman circus show here."

"I know it reeks of smoke, but bear with it. …And listen, Kazami. Both in my home country and this small country, illness is said to come from your life force. It's all the same. Your health, build, growth, and personality all come from your life force."

"Then in Mikage's case…?"

"She's a human with an automaton body that evolves into a human body. She is the one completed version of that. Since her creator and parents are no more, only she has the right to define herself. She defines herself as a doll, but why is that?"

"Eh?"

Kazami tilted her head forward.

…What am I supposed to say?

She knew she was not good at thinking about others and their feelings, but she tried to do so.

"Is it because she can't evolve? In other words, she's a doll because she isn't becoming a person?"

"Ha ha. You're good at going for the easy answer, aren't you? You could say that's it and you could say it isn't. It's definitely part of the problem, but it forms a…s…sp…spalir!"

"Spiral."

"Are you mocking four thousand years of history!?"

"Please stop jumping to misdirected anger at Mach speed. Anyway, what are you trying to say?"

"It's simple. She's decided for herself why she can't evolve and that is in turn preventing her from evolving."

"Eh?"

"What power is preventing her from evolving?"

Kazami frowned, but she had an immediate answer to Chao's question this time.

"The destructive weapons of Susamikado and Keravnos, right? She's afraid of evolving into a weapon."

"You really are stupid. That's a part of her, so it gets stronger when she evolves. Even if she turns into a human, it won't go away. She will simply swap out her automaton body for a human one. Did you hear that? It's nothing more than swapping them out. Nothing is

disappearing. It's only natural for Susamikado to grow stronger as she evolves."

"Th-then…" Kazami thought. "Has she stopped evolving because of the missing half of the Concept Core?"

"That's wrong too and the young Hiba is probably vaguely aware of it. You can ask Sayama about it later."

"Then what is it that's stopping Mikage's evolution?"

"I already told you: her life force."

Suddenly, an odd sound came from the other side of the tent behind them. It was disturbing the conversation, so Kazami glanced toward it.

"Doctor Chao, why does it sound like someone is being beaten?"

"Oh, Yonkichi tried to attend to Mikage ahead of the other three, so they're settling that."

"I see. So to get back on topic, what do you mean by her life force?"

"Life force is life force."

"You didn't give this much thought, did you?"

"You really have gotten impudent lately. Don't look down on an older woman, okay? This goes back to that spilar I was mentioning before."

Kazami decided not to correct her this time. When she nodded twice, Chao pulled a new cigarette from her pocket and placed it in her mouth.

"Let's say we have a sick person. While they're sick, they're let into the hospital, worried about, and can relax knowing they'll be healed even if it isn't easy. But what happens once they're healed?"

"Won't they be happy?"

"Probably, but even if the people waiting outside the hospital will hug them when they get home, those relationships will be back to normal the next day. That's why some people realize they liked it better when everyone was worrying about them. …Okay, Miss Chao's lecture ends here! Can you answer the question now!?"

"Miss is pushing it, so how about we go with lady?"

"That's just your personal opinion."

And yours isn't? thought Kazami as she scratched her head.

At any rate, she thought she knew what Chao was getting at.

"Mikage is afraid of becoming human, isn't she? She's been an

automaton for as long as she can remember, her current life is all about fighting, and she's never had a normal life as a normal person. That makes staying an automaton feel safer than losing her current life and evolving into the unknown world of a human."

She took a breath.

"If she becomes human, her life will also be swapped out for a human one. This is an evolution rather than an improvement. … However, she prefers her current life with Hiba to what she would gain by becoming human."

"That's right. Having a young man work to meet your every need is obviously the best option."

"I'm going to ignore that difference in values, but does that mean you don't like those four brothers?"

As soon as she asked that, the beating behind them grew silent.

Chao smiled bitterly.

"They're an irreplaceable bunch."

The beating resumed and Kazami allowed the sounds to blend into the background noises of nature.

…The people around Mikage must be kind. Kind enough for her to show restraint.

Mikage was being stupid.

Hiba acted pretty much the same even when she was not with him.

However, he was always talking about her. But not because he was worried. It was always about how much he enjoyed being with her.

"That must be the answer. It's a wonder she didn't grow up to be spoiled, though."

Kazami had problems with controlling herself, but she thought about using this as a disciplinary model when she had kids of her own. She would need to ask Hiba…no, his mother about it some time.

…My parents won't be any help at all.

"Kazami, it looks like you're thinking about something completely unrelated."

"Eh? No, I was still thinking about Mikage. Sort of."

"Really? …Well, it may have been a mistake to bring Mikage with us. She's seen Hiba here as he would be once she became human

and was no longer restricting him. He can choose to fight freely, he can lose, and he can choose someone other than her."

Kazami recalled when Typhon had appeared before the others. According to Sayama, Mikage had called in Susamikado as a decoy. That was not necessarily a bad decision.

...But it means she called for Susamikado without Hiba.

"Instead of choosing a human like Hiba, she called for Susamikado which she thinks is stopping her evolution."

There was no movement in the tent behind them. Mikage was asleep with a sedative and was wrapped in healing charms and bandages, but she had Sibyl with her.

As Chao lit another cigarette, her expression was lit up for an instant. It was a harsh look with a wrinkled brow.

After breathing out the smoke, she spoke quietly.

"I'll give you a nice piece of information, Kazami. Japanese UCAT is beginning to work out the location of 3rd-Gear's base using the paths of Typhon and that red god of war. Also, the other UCATs are requesting that they exterminate the remnants of 3rd-Gear."

"Why would the other UCATs interfere like that? And how do you know about this?"

"I'll answer the second question later. Now, the first question is an easy one. There are a lot of bad stories about 3rd-Gear's past. To earn the favor of the other Gears, those UCATs have decided it isn't worth negotiating with 3rd-Gear and therefore want us to exterminate them. By dropping 3rd-Gear below all the other Gears, that past can be swept away."

She smiled bitterly.

"It sounds logical enough, but they're actually trying to crush the Leviathan Road. If they do that, Japanese UCAT can't take everything for themselves. Now listen carefully."

"O-okay."

Kazami frantically answered and Chao smiled.

"No need to get all flustered. 3rd isn't stupid. They must know letting their location be known will focus the wrath of all the other Gears on them. When they tried to get along with 1st, they had a unit sent after them to take revenge. This leaves them with only one escape. Can you tell me what that is?"

"The Leviathan Road?"

She understood that. The Leviathan Road was a series of negotiations meant to transcend the Gear framework and bring them all alongside each other.

Chao nodded and exhaled some smoke.

"You all will battle 3rd. If everything is set up properly, 3rd will move in to attack when they sense danger. They will ask to be brought into the Leviathan Road framework. Of course, they won't just come out and say it. So, Kazami, where is that idiot?"

"You mean Sayama? He went to the beach to speak with Hiba."

A smile came to her lips.

…That's right. That idiot must understand all that.

After all…

"He wants Hiba to tell him what 3rd-Gear's second impurity is. He said that will likely be the greatest obstacle during the Leviathan Road."

"Is that so? 3rd-Gear's actions themselves are quite something, but…well, 7th-Gear did something similar. It wouldn't be any fun without something that exceeds that."

Kazami turned toward Chao.

"7th-Gear?"

"It's nothing much, but you probably weren't able to read it in those documents you got today. That only covered the National Defense Department days."

"…"

"This comes after that. In the old UCAT days when the different UCATs around the world hadn't completely gathered together, Japanese UCAT was more or less the world's central UCAT. The American and European ones were larger and better funded, though. Anyway, that old UCAT had people in charge of investigating and battling the different Gears. Removing Shinjou left five from the National Defense Department and one idiot each from the Middle Eastern, American, and Chinese UCATs were added. Those eight were known as the Eight Great Dragon Kings."

She smiled bitterly.

"I belonged to Chinese UCAT back then and I still have connections there. That's how I learned about that previous topic. Keep it a secret, but I'm Chao Sei, the Eight Great Dragon Kings member in charge of 7th-Gear."

●

Sayama faced Hiba on the moonlit beach.

"Now then," he said as he brushed his bangs against the sea breeze. "A lot has happened, but it is time you gave your answer, Hiba boy."

"My answer to what?"

"Whether you will join us or not."

That response brought a change to Hiba's expression. He frowned and looked away.

"This really isn't the time for that. You saw what happened to Mikage-san."

"But now that 3rd-Gear has taken action, the others are likely to do the same. Even if Mikage-kun was injured, the world continues to revolve around me. Am I wrong?"

"Um…I'm not sure what part I'm supposed to point out first."

"If every part of it is wrong, it cancels out and becomes true, Hiba boy." Sayama remained perfectly expressionless. "Is this not the perfect opportunity? How about you tell us about 3rd-Gear's second impurity and join us?"

"I can't do that. I've been fighting this whole time in order to-…"

"In order to protect Mikage-kun and continue her evolution? Are you saying she will become human if you obtain the full Concept Core?"

Sayama looked at Hiba who was frowning in the moonlight.

However…

…That expression appears to be false.

Then I will destroy it, concluded Sayama.

He pointed at Hiba with his right hand and Baku emulated the action atop his head.

"You are blaming the concepts for her lack of evolution."

"What do you mean? Keravnos only has half of the Concept Core."

"I apologize that all of my information is secondhand, but I must ask a question here."

Sayama swung up the hand pointed at Hiba and noise burst from his shirt's shoulder.

"You say Keravnos is stored here and its mechanism may indeed be a portion of Mikage-kun. However, even though half of the

Concept Core is found inside it and is therefore stored in her concept space, is it really a part of her body?"

"Well…"

He knows the answer, thought Sayama.

The main point was a simple matter.

"If it is a part of her body, it must function as a reactor much like in Fafnir Custom or Typhon. However, Keravnos is a mere warhead. Even if you retrieve the other half…" He showed off a smile. "It will only strengthen Keravnos. It will further turn Mikage-kun into a destructive weapon."

Hiba's eyebrows twisted a bit.

That expression told Sayama something.

…This fortunate boy does not know that it is he who is stopping her evolution.

But she seemed to have realized that she was restricting him.

Sayama thought it was good that Mikage had called for Susamikado in the ocean.

…No matter what might happen, she had thought about the possibility of leaving him.

"The only remaining problem is you, Hiba boy. What will you do now that Mikage-kun has rejected you? You no longer have the power to fight 3rd-Gear and you no longer have a reason to. But will you still fight them?"

"Well…"

After a pause, Hiba finally answered.

"I don't really have any other choice, do I?"

"Why not? Because of what happened in your grandfather's generation?"

"To be honest, I wasn't told much about what happened with him."

"Then are you fulfilling a nonexistent responsibility on nothing but inertia?"

"No. I still have the duty of the one who knows the truth, Sayama-san. I have the duty of the one who knows the second impurity," he said. "In a way, this may be exactly what I wanted. Mikage-san can't do anything right now, but I know the second impurity and I can cleanse it on my own."

"I see."

Sayama nodded and gave a small smile.

…Interesting. Even now, he is keeping her in mind.

Sayama thought of Shinjou. If she at least appeared to have rejected him, would he continue thinking of her?

…Of course.

He recalled the countless flesh-colored images and soft sensations from the past and he checked his memories for the many words they had exchanged afterwards. He did so thrice just to be sure. Once he was done, he understood that they were perfect and so he nodded.

"Hiba boy, you are likely similar to me. Especially how we are both one wrong step away from being stalkers."

"U-um, based on that brief happy look on your face just now, I think we're at most only 10% alike!"

"No need to be modest. I am not such a Pervsuke that I pretend to wash my partner in the bath and instead touch her butt. I only touch my partner to gain an understanding. Your method is much more perverted."

"I'm going to try to keep this polite since you're my upperclassman, but you are insane!"

"Calm down. Those who do not understand themselves are the first to die on the battlefield."

Hiba fell silent at that.

…Shinjou-kun would have fought a while longer before agreeing.

Underclassmen truly are obedient, he realized. *How wonderful.*

Hiba was averting his gaze for some reason, but Sayama chose to ignore it.

"Let us get back on track, Hiba boy. We were discussing Mikage-kun's evolution."

Hiba turned back toward him when Sayama crossed his arms, so he nodded toward the boy.

"Now, what do you think is preventing her from evolving?"

"The Concept Core, but you readily rejected that already."

"Don't you already understand why that is?"

"Well…" he began.

Sayama took a step toward him.

"Let us discuss a hypothetical situation."

"What?"

"Someone once held a secret, but they could not divulge that secret to the person who said they wanted to be with them. The other person had come to a vague understanding of that untold secret, but they chose to leave well enough alone."

After that final phrase, Shinjou could be heard shouting from a tent in the rocky area.

"You liar!!"

For a brief instant, Sayama caught a glimpse of Shinjou standing up in the rocky area, but Izumo's hand forced her back down at twice the speed.

Hiba did not turn in time, but he still tried looking around.

"D-did I just hear someone shout at you?"

"This is the Seto Inland Sea. This land was filled with pirates during the Sengoku period, so I hear ghosts show up at night."

"O-okay, we can just leave it at that. So you were saying?"

"I have this to say to you: you think both of you need to evolve, but you are afraid of destroying your current relationship and thus think up excuses for not evolving."

And…

"That is not all, Hiba boy. You say you wish to protect Mikage-kun, but that is not what one would say if they were certain that they were protecting her. Hiba boy, you believe that *she* is protecting *you* even now."

Hiba gasped, but Sayama shook his head.

"Of course, even if that is the case, it is not a bad thing."

Hiba frowned.

"It isn't a bad thing? Even though it means I'm not protecting her properly?"

"It is an issue of self-awareness. Even if you find yourself lacking, she may consider it plenty. And positively thinking of yourself as inexperienced will prevent you from getting careless and lead to improvement. I try to keep my own thoughts positive in that way. For example, I often wonder why I give in so easily with Shinjou-kun."

Sounds of a struggle came from the rocky area, but it quickly quieted down. Hiba once more looked over.

"Can we really just ignore that?"

“I have no friends who are rocks. Do you?” asked Sayama. “Anyway, there is a small problem in your case, Hiba boy. You believe she is protecting you and you use that to justify being weaker than her, don’t you?”

“B-but Susamikado and everything else are her power.”

“You are the one fighting. She is merely lending you her power. You are the one using power descended from 3rd-Gear to fight 3rd-Gear. And your ultimate objective is cleansing 3rd-Gear’s second impurity,” explained Sayama. “You need to be aware of the meaning behind your fight. Now, what is this second impurity? I would like to hear your reason for fighting 3rd-Gear so that we too may gain the right to fight them. Should I add ‘please’?”

“Do you really think I’ll tell you?”

“No, but what about Mikage-kun? She summoned Susamikado on her own in order to save you, so I believe she would answer on her own.”

“…”

Hiba reflexively took a fighting stance.

He dug his feet into the sand and pulled his right leg back.

“You mean…?”

“You joining us in our fight sounds like a decent victory prize, doesn’t it?”

Sayama also took a fighting stance. Hiba slowly began to nod, but then quickly shook his head and smiled bitterly.

“N-no, wait. You never said whose victory prize that would be. If I win, please tell me what weaknesses you see in me. Izumo-san already told me a lot, but I think there’s still more. I need to keep those in mind while fighting 3rd-Gear.”

“You are not going to ask us to help Mikage-kun?”

“All of you will look after her even if I don’t ask you to, won’t you?” His bitter smile deepened. “If I asked, it would worry her. She would worry you were only being so kind because I asked you.”

“She must truly be ill if she worries about kindness.”

Sayama lowered his stance to match Hiba’s.

The moon filled the top of his vision and he realized the night was growing late. That led him to wonder what was happening with the Tamiya and Hiba families in Tokyo.

…An unexpected match between students of the same master.

He pressed lightly against the ground while still wearing his shoes, relaxed his shoulders, and lowered Baku to the ground.

He watched as Baku frantically ran to the rocky area.

“No holding back and no handicaps. My fist was broken once, so I cannot use it to punch. And your injuries from this morning are likely still affecting you.”

“Understood. What determines the outcome?”

“We will both know when it happens. Don’t you think we have reached that level?”

“You’re right,” agreed Hiba.

A moment later, the boy rushed toward Sayama.

●

Hiba focused on the distance between them.

It came down to an instant.

Neither of them had the same endurance as Izumo.

That meant it would be over if even a single attack hit Hiba.

However, the same went for his opponent. If Hiba got the one attack in, Sayama’s body would be unable to keep up even if he remained conscious. Hiba had learned that all too well in his fight with Izumo.

Also, the two of them were students of the same dojo. The Hiba School of martial arts taught combat techniques beyond mere self defense and it focused on unarmed combat while also assuming the use of bladed weapons. It contained almost every type of attack and defense.

Hiba could hardly say he had mastered the techniques which often used speed to perform a series of attacks.

However, his opponent was the same. He knew what his opponent could do and he knew what speed he had.

“…!”

And so he made the first move.

It was dark save the moonlight, but that gave everything a deep contrast. When Hiba lowered down and moved, Sayama would be unable to see it all perfectly. Even the shadow that could give away his movements was falling directly below him at this time.

He moved closer.

Sayama swung his left fist, but Hiba decided it was a feint. Even if

it hit, Sayama could not clench that fist properly, so it would have little effect.

…His real attack lies elsewhere!

Sayama moved his right foot. That was his true aim.

But that was not the kick.

It was the sand.

"…!"

Hiba saw it coming, but it was difficult to oppose sand flying up from even further down than him. Closing his eyes would rob him of his vision, but keeping them open would allow the sand to do the same thing. Also, knocking it away with his hand would momentarily prevent him from attacking.

He then heard Sayama speak.

"This is an experience you never had with the dirt floor of that open-air dojo, isn't it?"

He was right.

But Hiba made up his mind. He charged forward and chose the simplest method available.

He closed only his right eye.

The sand arrived and got in his left eye, but as soon as the sand struck his skin, he opened his right eye.

The right half of his vision had not been lost and he saw Sayama preparing his opposite leg.

“Too slow!”

Hiba charged to Sayama’s right.

Meanwhile, Sayama stepped back with the leg he had prepared for a kick and began to take a defensive stance. He drew his stomach back in order to withstand a blow.

But that was not Hiba’s intent. Hiba had only the one eye and he was not reckless enough to attack with his sense of distance thrown off.

Hiba looked to the left hand Sayama had used as a feint.

That hand was slower to be drawn back then the rest of his body.

Hiba reached out both hands and grabbed that hand. It was difficult to determine its distance with only one eye, but bringing in both hands allowed his fingers to touch it and then adjust to grab it.

He grasped the wrist.

This meant Hiba could not strike Sayama. Instead, he accelerated to make use of his speed.

“!”

Sand exploded backwards as he kicked off the ground and ran to Sayama’s left side.

In an instant, he circled around the boy.

Sayama remained expressionless, so Hiba could not tell what he was thinking. *That’s no different from normal,* thought Hiba.

He had seen Sayama in his grandfather’s dojo a few times and he had thought Sayama was a very mature person back then.

He also recalled the stories of Sayama’s grandfather that his own grandfather would often tell.

His own grandfather would only speak of Sayama’s grandfather with insults. He would not tell Hiba much about what happened during the war. It seemed he had had a lot of other friends, but only a few of those friendships had continued after the war: Izumo’s grandfather, a sorcerer named Siegfried, and an old man in America named Thunderson.

He would insult them all with silly postwar stories about them.

…That's right.

Hiba thought in his fighting stance.

…If I find someone who can tell what I'm thinking, keeps up with me, continues on ahead, and faces me without fear, I'll insult them in the same way when I grow up.

While cutting by Sayama's side with all his strength, he remembered seeing the past the other day, the meeting in the Kinugasa Library, and losing to Izumo that day.

He continued on.

He twisted Sayama's left wrist outwards as if pushing it and he forced it upwards.

"…"

He felt something shift out of place through Sayama's left arm, but it was not a metal component of some machine. It was a joint of flesh and bone.

He had dislocated Sayama's left shoulder.

Just as he felt all strength leave Sayama's left hand, Hiba tossed that arm upwards.

He had poured his strength into the attack without holding back. If Sayama was unlucky, it could even leave long-lasting effects.

…But I must win here!

Sayama should have already torn a portion of his muscles and felt the painful scraping as his joint bent in the wrong direction. The pain of a dislocation came from the nerves being twisted by the muscle and bone, so it reverberated directly in the brain. Until the bone was set back in place, the intense pain would continue.

Hiba nodded and immediately came to a stop. His right foot stabbed into the sand to slow him.

With sand flying into the air, he turned behind him.

"Someone call a doct-…"

When he turned around, he saw something unthinkable in the air before him: the bottom of a leather shoe.

"!?"

As soon as he wondered what had happened, the toe of the shoe dug into his solar plexus. It seemed to jab into the flesh between his chest and gut.

The sharp toe of the leather shoe stopped at over five centimeters into his gut.

He did not move.

And in his motionlessness, he realized he was having trouble breathing.

As his body slowly grew stiff and heavy, the owner of the foot spoke expressionlessly.

“Yes, it does seem we need a doctor.”

He then jabbed his foot forward even more to push Hiba away.

“…”

Hiba was unable to remove the tension from his body and he collapsed limply backwards.

…I lost just like earlier today.

But as he collapsed, he did not overlook Sayama’s left arm. That arm was hanging limply at his side.

“Do you not feel pain?” he asked while slowly collapsing to the sand.

Or at least, he tried to.

However, not even his own breaths were coming from his mouth. The shock was keeping his diaphragm from moving.

He merely looked up at the moon while unable to breathe or speak.

Then a sudden shadow cut across that pale disk of light.

The shadow took the shape of a shoe bottom.

Immediately afterwards, a shoe heel swung down at his stomach and supplied a great impact.

“Kah!!”

“Oh? It seems you can breathe now. It may have been a harsh treatment, but I am glad it worked.”

Strength returned to Hiba’s body, but pain arrived with it. An odd sense of heat toward the top of his gut caused Hiba to open his mouth and air tried to escape his stomach. At the same time, he heard a voice.

“If you can breathe, it would seem you do not need a doctor after all. Now, I suppose I should charge you for the medical costs of my arm here. Do not worry. It is a trivial sum. Including insurance, it is a mere 73,500,000 yen.”

Hiba tried to ask where that number came from.

“Kah…hah!”

But only that odd voice came out.

…Ahh, this must be what they call S&M. This is my first time experiencing it.

Just as he realized he was sweating, the voice spoke once more.

"Will you be paying or not? If so, continue writhing in pain. If not, remain motionless."

Hiba held his breath and stretched himself out on the sand, but he did not last even three seconds.

"Gwah!"

"So close. And I was thinking of forgiving you if you had lasted five seconds. What a shame."

"What are you talking about, Sayama-kun!?"

Hiba looked to the rocky area with teary eyes and saw Shinjou wearing a white dress.

…How feminine.

But that thought was immediately followed by another.

…I'm sorry, Mikage-san. I was charmed by another girl.

And then…

"Wait! That's a guy!"

He frantically shot up. Doing so made him cough, but a certain question was much more important than the physical pain.

…Oh, no. Have I become the same kind of pervert as Sayama-san and Shinjou-san?

"What is it, Hiba boy? If you were having inappropriate thoughts about Shinjou-kun, I will encase you in concrete and use you as flood control in the Aki River. As a citizen, it is only natural to lend a helping hand to the city, don't you think?"

"D-don't be ridiculous. I'm normal! I'm certainly not hard gay!"

"Sayama-kun, can I ask you to lend a helping hand to Ryuuji-kun?"

Shinjou gave a dry smile.

Seeing the first aid kit in Shinjou's hand, Hiba let out a breath and lowered his head.

"S-sorry. I won't say anything about your personal preferences. …Anyway, I lost, didn't I?"

"Yes. I'll ignore that first part, but you pretty clearly lost. Except I think Sayama-kun has the worse injury."

Sayama looked to his left arm which still hung limp and unmoving.

He tilted his head.

"Yes, this does seem to be a bad injury. The pain has been

reverberating through me for a while now. Oh, but I think some devoted nursing from Shinjou-kun and a lap lent as a pillow might just heal it. If you are bringing me food, canned peaches would be nice."

"You really are calm about this," commented Shinjou.

Hiba sighed as he watched the two of them.

"I can't hope to match that," he muttered as he collapsed back onto the beach.

"I would not be so sure. Before the fight, you yourself said you have weaknesses. I merely revealed fewer of my weaknesses in this fight. I knew the pain was coming, so I was able to prepare for it."

"Do you mean you predicted what would happen?"

"No. You do not predict the fight. You rule it."

"What's the difference?"

Hiba heard a bitter laugh, but it quickly vanished.

"My apologies. That was such an elementary question that I could not help myself. …Let me ask you this: what is it you are constantly predicting?"

"The flow of the fight."

"No. You just lost points, Hiba boy. Stay silent and burn my words into your mind. You are not predicting the fight; you are predicting your own victory. Specifically, it is a victory that keeps you from harm," explained Sayama. "So when the prediction you have conveniently built up ends yet the fight continues on, you lose despite being certain of your victory. If you instead rule the fight, that would not happen. Ruling the fight includes both receiving your opponent's strength and not allowing them to use it. It means to continue fighting while hoping you can bring the fight to an end."

"But that…"

"I believe you can do that now that Mikage-kun is not with you and now that the damage is sent to you. You were so focused on protecting her, that you were only able to predict quick and brief paths to victory. The surprise of the damage was one reason you lost to Izumo today, but it was also because you believed you had won after getting a nice combo on him."

A shadow cut across the moon once more.

This time it was a hand. Sayama's right hand.

"Take my hand, Hiba boy, and we will fight alongside each other

on the battlefield you are meant to rule. If you insist on cleansing 3rd-Gear's impurity, then we will assist you in that," said the boy. "You must have a time when you have Mikage-kun comfort you. That would be when you are together in the god of war and you can hear her voice. In other words, after you have fought 3rd-Gear. But if she were to evolve, you would no longer need to fight in order to receive that comfort. And to gain that, you must take responsibility."

"Responsibility? What do you mean?"

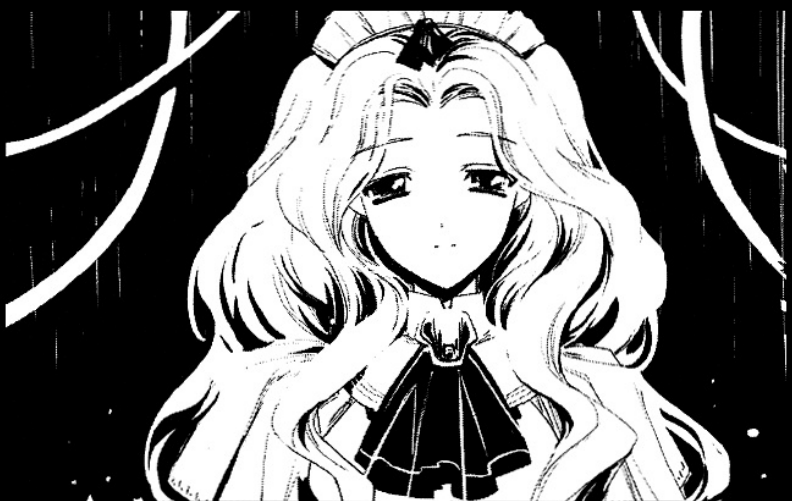
"You will bear something as the one who cleansed 3rd-Gear's impurities. That something could even be a portion of 3rd-Gear. Hiba boy, Team Leviathan and the Taka-Akita Academy student council would like you to join us as the one who must live on while bearing the weight of 3rd-Gear."

And…

"You have already made up your mind, haven't you? I can somehow tell. That white bandanna on your forehead is likely a sentimental item that hides and protects a scar which reminds you of her. But it is that very sentimentalism that means I must ask you about the second impurity of that heartless Gear."

Chapter 31

“Cleansing Transition”



Saying it will put you at ease
But what does it mean to release it?

●

The moonlight washed over the white building that acted as 3rd-Gear's base.

But even though the moon had passed its zenith, the building still had its lights on. And that did not just apply to the living floors. The hangar down below was also lit.

The hangar's door was cracked open and two people stood near the entrance.

The woman in white and the woman in a maid outfit were Miyako and Moira 1st.

Miyako was walking across the white floor and toward the stairs leading to the god of war hanger deck. Her footsteps rang loudly and she showed no sign of restraining herself.

She was frowning while looking back in the hangar. In addition to the nine gods of war – including Cottus – lined up, there was a large white form.

It was Typhon.

She noted the lack of light in Typhon's sight devices.

"Where's Apollo?"

"He will not leave for a while after returning," answered Moira 1st from behind. "Where is Lady Gyes?"

"She flew off again saying she had business to take care of. But what's with Typhon? I saw it just now and that definitely wasn't the rich boy controlling it. It was acting like a beast."

"What do you think about Typhon, Lady Miyako?"

That question brought Miyako to a stop.

She held the railing of the staircase to the hangers on the second floor. The metal railing tilted its head when she did not climb the stairs, but it decided it was worth waiting.

Miyako turned to Moira 1st.

"Typhon is afraid of everything but itself."

"Correct." Moira 1st smiled, but then looked directly at Miyako with the ends of her eyebrows lowered. "Typhon is imprisoned by fear, so it calls for Lord Apollo. It wants him to pilot it, fight, and eliminate the fear it once gained."

"The fear it once gained? What do you mean by…?"

She trailed off as she thought about what a machine would fear.

…I guess that'd be its own destruction.

She recalled three facts.

First, she had seen the name Artemis in Typhon's cockpit and the god of war in the basement. Second, Typhon had been damaged in the same places as Apollo's injuries when they fell from the cliff. And third…

…Damage to a god of war is fed back to the pilot.

From that, she did not know if there was a connection between the basement god of war and Typhon.

…But Moira 2nd hinted there is.

Assuming that was true, Miyako spoke.

"What if Typhon has died once before?"

"Are you asking me that, Lady Miyako?"

"No, I'm asking both of us."

She continued to think about the connection and similarities between the basement god of war and Typhon.

"Artemis."

Both their cockpits had contained that name.

And she had heard that Apollo piloted a god of war that was made from Artemis's body.

"The god of war in the basement was Apollo's."

But, she thought to stop herself from jumping to conclusions. And then Moira 1st gave the main fact opposing that theory.

"That god of war was cut in two. Lord Apollo would have been killed instantly."

"Yes. But there was a copilot. That means… Both it and Typhon aren't only piloted by Apollo! Someone else piloted them along with him!"

As she spoke, her knowledge began to link together.

She made deductions and she shouted the conclusion with too much force to stop herself.

"Gods of war send their damage back to the pilot, but what if there are two pilots? What happened with the basement god of war's copilot? How about this? Typhon's cockpit was transplanted from that god of war and it contains the copilot who died in Apollo's place."

As for that copilot's name…

"Artemis! The name written in Typhon's cockpit was that of

Apollo's sister! She could not have his child, but he still kept her by his side. …Is that what happened!?"

"No," answered Moira 1st in a troubled tone of voice.

Miyako gasped and almost fell to her knees in an odd sense of disappointment, but she was stopped by what Moira 1st said next.

"That is not quite right, Lady Miyako."

"Not quite?"

"Lord Apollo was the one who died."

Miyako thought on that, but she finally frowned once more and tilted her head.

"But that idiot's alive."

"Yes, he is being *kept* alive." Moira 1st's eyebrows lay flat, she looked directly at Miyako, and she nodded. "The god of war in the basement was created using Lady Artemis's body, but that process was not completed. It was only a partial unification. Thus, when it received the damage you saw, Lord Apollo died instantly and Lady Artemis was heavily injured."

"Then…why is that idiot still alive?"

"The data for those united with the god of war is kept separate within the machine, but what do you think happens if one is damaged and the other sacrifices itself to repair the first?"

"…"

Miyako tried to imagine what that meant, but she had trouble.

…That idiot and his sister swapped out his death?

The questions "what?", "how?" and "why?" repeated in her mind and she could not gather her thoughts. The truth of Typhon and Apollo before her eyes seemed to reject the entire line of questioning.

…Wait.

Just as she tried to end the chaos in her mind, Moira 1st spoke.

"Lord Apollo's body died instantly, but his brain remained alive due to the residual oxygen. Lady Artemis then cut the limiters on their division within the god of war. It was only possible because their gods of war were Typhon and its prototype and because most of Lady Artemis's body had been modified into the god of war's internal circulatory system."

"So she gave her own body to recreate her dead brother's body? To resurrect him?"

"No, he could not be resurrected. We have no concept to make something from nothing. That is why she overwrote his death with her life."

The maid's shoulders drooped.

"To do so, a great amount of power had to be given to the cockpit and a location with no external interference was needed. As 3rd-Gear was destroyed, we hurriedly used that god of war's cockpit as Typhon's cockpit and we removed Lady Artemis's incomplete body from the cockpit as the overwritten corpse. …We did it all so as not to lose our master."

"That last comment wasn't needed, Moira 1st. You only did what your masters wanted. Automatons shouldn't be adding their own thoughts in there."

"My apologies," said Moira 1st with a bitter smile.

Miyako nodded.

"So did that return the idiot to normal?"

"We waited fifty-five years. The first fifty passed without incident, but the concepts suddenly began to activate and Moira 2nd detected both of their brainwaves in the five years after."

Miyako found something odd about what Moira 1st had said.

…I feel bad interrupting.

"Why were Artemis's brainwaves there? After the overwriting, wasn't she dead?"

"She lived on…as Typhon."

Moira 1st looked to the stairway ahead.

"Typhon was the one to die. …No, Lady Artemis took control of Typhon. Its control system, thought system, and everything else became hers," she said. "And Lord Apollo did not return to normal. The split and re-composition were imperfect, so he retains some of Typhon's mechanical properties."

"So that's why he collapsed on the edge of the concept space."

It had to have been difficult to take her all the way there.

Goddammit, she thought. *It feels like that idiot is ahead of me on everything.*

"So is this what's happening? Is Typhon's fear based on Artemis's revived memories of being killed?"

"Yes. And by joining with Typhon, she has unprecedented control over the Tartaros which allows her to appear outside it. As the time

of her death within Typhon approaches, she wails and calls for Lord Apollo to save her."

Miyako recalled the expression on that glowing woman who walked through the night and she recalled Typhon's scream.

…So even Typhon is a victim of the war.

"As they were the two to control time while in 3rd-Gear, Lord Apollo has greater control during the day and Lady Artemis has greater control at night. It seems Lord Apollo took brief control of Typhon when it first came across you, Lady Miyako. When its eyes are yellow, it is him in control."

Hearing that, Miyako lowered her head and turned her back to Moira 1st.

"Dammit," she muttered and placed her foot on the first step. "I'll check the rest on my own, but I have one last question. You said Typhon has half of 3rd-Gear's Concept Core, right? And you said it was that Concept Core that created Typhon and Apollo as they are now, right?"

She raised her head and looked up toward the top of the stairs to the hanger deck.

"So what happens if Typhon is destroyed?"

"That is simple. As Lord Apollo's re-composition was imperfect, he is synchronized with Typhon. If Typhon is destroyed or the Concept Core removed…"

The automaton paused.

"He will die."

●

"And that is the second impurity," said Hiba atop the rocky area.

He had wrapped ice from a cooler in a towel and held it to his stomach. He turned to his side where Shinjou was attaching powerful healing charms to Sayama.

Sayama returned the look with Baku on his head and he raised his left hand which Shinjou held.

"So is this what you are saying? Acquiring 3rd-Gear's Concept Core will kill Apollo?"

"Yes. The Concept Core needed to prevent the negative destruction of this world can only be obtained in exchange for his death. That's actually a pretty good deal. For me, I'm killing him for

peace and Mikage-san's evolution."

A voice responded to his self-deprecating comment. It came from Shinjou.

"But…that's a bad decision."

"A single human's life does indeed feel heavier than the entire planet. And based on the justice of the Leviathan Road, we cannot take something in exchange for a human life, even if it is the Concept Core."

"That's why I intended to fight," said Hiba. "The descendants of those who fought in the past would be fighting with no connection to Team Leviathan. For us, it would be the second round of the Concept War and no one would question it if one or the other of us died. But…"

He lowered his head and brought a hand to his forehead.

"That won't work anymore. Now that I've told you, Team Leviathan can't allow me to go through with it. If you did, you'd be using me to commit murder by proxy. And this means Team Leviathan can't even try to obtain 3rd-Gear's Concept Core. Doing so would mean killing to save the world."

"That's right," agreed Shinjou. "We're weighing the entire world against a single life. …But if the Leviathan Road is to be just, we can't accept murder even to save the world, Sayama-kun."

"I see no real problem there."

"That's right. There's no real pro- Wait, Sayama-san!"

Hiba's head shot up and he saw Sayama's expressionless face staring at him. Next to him, Shinjou was staring wide-eyed and looked pale even in the night.

Sayama looked back and forth between the two of them.

"What is the matter, Shinjou-kun? I would like to heal this injury as quickly as possible, but is the bandage for my shoulder not ready yet?"

"Not ready… S-Sayama-kun? What did you just say?"

"I said I see no real problem."

He gave a small smile that brought a chill to Hiba's spine which was even colder than the ice on his stomach.

…This boy…

He had readily made up his mind about something Hiba had been troubling over for years.

However, it was not Hiba who asked about it.

It was Shinjou.

“What do you mean, Sayama-kun!?”

She spoke loud enough for everyone in the area to turn toward them.

“I… I don’t want that! We may be opposites. If I say I don’t want to kill someone to save the world, that might mean you’ll say the opposite…”

Her words suddenly crumbled, her eyebrows bristled, and her mouth twisted.

“But…I don’t want you to say that.”

She lowered her head and Hiba saw something sparkling spill down.

…Shinjou-san must really care about him.

But what would Sayama do?

He raised his head and indeed turned to Shinjou. His eyes narrowed for just an instant and he nodded once even though Shinjou could not see with her head lowered.

That was all. When he turned back to Hiba, he was expressionless once more.

Before he could say something, Hiba sighed and opened his mouth.

“You’ll create misunderstandings if you don’t let your partner see how you feel about them.”

“Doing that would only make us both embarrassed. Besides, this is not our problem to discuss and resolve. It is true arrogance to make such a decision without the affected individual present. For now, we need only establish our individual arguments. Am I wrong?”

Sayama turned his head and looked behind Hiba.

“Eh?”

Shinjou raised her crying face and looked in the same direction.

Lastly, Hiba turned around.

As he did, the others scattered around the area looked in the same direction and stopped moving.

At some point, a woman had appeared in the rocky area. The moonlight lit her from behind.

She wore a red suit and Sayama spoke her name.

“Gyes-kun, correct? What do you need at this late hour?”

“That is simple.”

Gyes lightly spread her arms.

“I have come for the Leviathan Road so that 3rd-Gear might live on.”

●

A certain room was colored red.

It was approximately six square meters and it contained a work desk, a sink, and a portable stove with a pot on top. The work desk was lined with vats filled with liquid.

Wires were strung up near the ceiling and something like black sashes hung down from them.

It was a darkroom.

The only person lurking inside and working was an old man in a lab coat.

“Digital just can’t beat analog. I wonder what expressions I got.”

He put back on the red rubber gloves labelled “For Ooshiro’s use only – x3” and he peered inside one vat.

“Now then, is it about time to take them out?”

An instant later, the door behind him opened and a girl’s voice entered.

“Hey.”

“Ahhhhh!”

Ooshiro looked across the materials that had been exposed to the outside light. He spread his arms in the center of the room, and slowly moved his feet around to make a self-made slow motion rotation.

“You’ve destroyed my newfound youth that couldn’t be defeated by dogs or cicadas!!”

“Are you stupid or something? And this room stinks. This is your smell, isn’t it? I won’t forgive you even if you bow down to the ground.”

“That’s quite a lot to say in one breath, Brunhild-kun!”

Brunhild sighed in her uniform with the light of the darkroom’s standby room behind her.

Ooshiro then noticed a man in a lab coat peering into the room behind her.

“Kashima-kun? What an unusual pairing. What brings the two of

you here?”

“Well, the thing is…”

“Oh, wait a moment. Would you like some tea? Look. I have some nice black tea I recently got my hands on.”

As Ooshiro lifted the pot from the stove, Brunhild picked up the black cat at her feet and threw it inside the open top of the pot. The steam and tea that spilled out got on Ooshiro’s hands which still wore the rubber gloves.

“Ahhhhh!” cried both the cat and the old man.

終わりのクロニクル

“Quiet down, both of you. Think of it as sterilization and bear with it.”

The cat stuck its upper body out of the pot, bent backwards, and shouted at her.

“B-Brunhild! I can’t forgive that! I’m sorry!”

“Oh, poor thing. I think you’re confused.”

“And whose fault is that!? Also, look me in the eye when you speak to me, Brunhild!”

Brunhild frowned as she looked at the shouting black cat whose stomach and above seemed to grow out of the white pot held by Ooshiro.

“That’s a poor balance of colors.”

“Th-that’s all you have to say!? That’s all!? Surely there’s something else!”

“Quiet down. And this is taking far too long. 2nd-Gear representative, explain the situation as concisely as you can.”

When Brunhild saw Kashima filming the cat with a small video camera, she frowned again.

“What are you doing?”

“My Harumi has started showing interest in moving things, so I thought a video like this would be good to have. Don’t worry. When I bring the footage home, I’ll have redone the sound and background. Maybe it can be happening in outer space.”

Brunhild grabbed the top of the camera and slammed it to the floor.

It could be heard breaking and Kashima cried out after a short delay.

“Ahhhhhh!”

“Quiet down. None of you are doing anything to move this conversation along.”

“I’m hesitant to point it out, but that’s entirely your fault!”

Brunhild ignored the cat’s point, crossed her arms, and looked to Ooshiro.

“I hear the other UCATs have been contacting you. Why?”

“Ah… I can’t really answer that.”

“Let me be clear, Ooshiro. We are the representatives of our Gears. You must disclose all of your information concerning the Leviathan Road.”

"I see. And what will you be giving us in exchange?"

Brunhild sighed.

"A lack of suspicion about UCAT's actions. Don't you need that for the future?"

She was not asking, but Ooshiro gave an exaggerated tilt of the head.

"Hmm. But there are some who will suspect us whether you do or not."

Brunhild frowned at that and Kashima crouched down next to her.

"Then how about this, UCAT Director Ooshiro?"

Once he stood up, he held the tape from the broken camera on the floor. The tape had not been harmed.

"What if I told you I was using this camera to film last night's Dog-Girl Attack and Cicada Incident?"

"Hmm. But it's a video camera. The image quality drops when compared to photographs."

"That depends on your mindset. Why not awaken to the wonders of video over still images? While videos do look lower quality when you pause them, they look wonderful in motion. Footage of a daughter or wife can be especially amazing. What about it? Are you ready to find a new hobby?"

"What you're doing will only increase the criminal activity within UCAT," pointed out Brunhild.

Ooshiro, on the other hand, scratched his head and groaned.

"Hmmm. But I don't have a wife or daughter like you. All I have is a strange son and his cement-like maid. Do you have a more appealing offer?"

"Well…"

After some thought, Kashima clapped his hands together.

"UCAT's development department has been performing a certain experiment lately. We use the video and photographs taken of enemies during battle to create 3D models."

He pulled a laptop from his coat and displayed a realistic 3D image of a woman.

"What do you think of the latest version of Polygon Natsu-san!? She can move on a grid and everything."

"Did you get her permission for that?" asked Brunhild.

"It doesn't matter as long as it's for my personal enjoyment. Plus,

I have the real one anyway. This is just an experiment."

"This is brilliant!" suddenly shouted Ooshiro. "If I use this, any enemy captured by UCAT cameras can be mine, right!? I can even make a virtual Miyoko based on her photos! My passion for figurines has been reignited!"

"I get the feeling you're confusing virtual images with real ones, but you can indeed do that!"

"I'm starting to feel really sorry for UCAT's enemies."

Kashima ignored Brunhild and pulled a white card from his pocket.

"For the time being, I will give you this. It contains a pass to create three figurines, so please use it well. Also, each figurine will add a point to your card. At thirty points, you get a member of the development department for a month. Feel free to use them for game development."

"I see. I am also worried about security."

"No need to worry. The wrapping paper is printed with the Heart Sutra in Sanskrit, so your family will not find out or grow suspicious. Even if it arrives while they are home, they will only think you have awoken to your Buddhist side."

"Won't that make them more suspicious?"

"We have planned for that. The package reflects infrared, X-rays, and all other strange rays and will not break even if one hundred mechanical dragons stepped on it. It requires your fingerprint to open, but it will self-destruct quite spectacularly if forced open."

A moment later, a spectacular explosion sounded in the distance and a small rumbling followed.

After a short delay, alarms rang and the corridor grew noisy.

"And just like that, no evidence will remain behind," added Kashima.

"That leaves plenty! But you are well-prepared, I'll give you that."

"You need to add 'in a way' to that," cut in Brunhild. "Anyway, I want to get back on topic."

"Sure," said Ooshiro as he held up the pot containing the cat. "It's a simple matter. We're beginning to learn where 3rd-Gear is and the other UCATs are telling us to defeat them right away. They claim 3rd-Gear is a taboo Gear and so we should defeat them before the other Gears learn of their continued existence. Basically, we are

to act now to eliminate future problems."

"But that would mean rejecting the Leviathan Road, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, but that's exactly why they want it. Mikoto-kun and the others have suddenly started to have real influence. The preliminary Leviathan Road negotiations with 3rd-Gear's representative have begun using the communications networks of the Chinese, German, and Japanese UCATs."

Brunhild clicked her tongue and muttered "her" at the mention of German UCAT.

Ooshiro smiled bitterly.

"Yes, Diana-kun opened the line. The other UCATs are in an uproar right now. The negotiation with 3rd-Gear is being broadcast in real time to China, Germany, and Japan. The rest of the UCATs – especially American UCAT – are attempting to hold those three in check in case they are attempting to build connections with 3rd ahead of the rest," he explained. "I will be going later, but it seems Mikoto-kun asked for you two to stay away."

"Why?"

"He said that is needed to 'fall in step' with 3rd-Gear. If 1st or 2nd showed up, it could put the other Gears on guard. Also…there is a danger of violating certain impurities this time and he does not want you to be guilty of that simply by showing up."

"Does he really think we'll do what he says?"

"He also said he was counting on you if anything happened to them."

Brunhild's eyebrows rose for a brief moment, but she soon frowned instead.

"Hmph. If he's going to worry for us on his own, he can go fail on his own. …We can listen in, can't we?"

"Yes. We can hear everything in Okayama until the negotiation with 3rd-Gear comes to an end."

"I see." Brunhild turned her back while grabbing the cat pot. "This means 3rd-Gear is already on the way to the Leviathan Road. Whatever happens in this negotiation, Sayama will not let them escape. The only remaining question is how he will clear away the crimes of 3rd-Gear's past."

Ooshiro shrugged.

"Negotiations are not done alone. I'm sure they will show us a

wonderful answer.”

●

Words were exchanged below the moon.

Those words were uttered by Sayama and Gyes who stood on the beach.

A folding table was set up between them and only a microphone sat atop it. They stood on either side of Shinjou who sat in a chair and took notes as the record keeper.

The area behind Shinjou was deserted all the way to the rocky area. That was how inviolable the negotiation table was viewed.

On top of that, Gyes was using her gravitational control to surround them in a gravity barrier at a distance of a few meters. To Shinjou, the surrounding landscape occasionally seemed to distort.

…That probably bends optical weapons too. I wonder if Ex-St would work.

Even as she thought, she continued taking notes. She was writing down Sayama and Gyes’s words, but there was little meaning as it was being recorded by the microphone. Sayama had told her to write down an outline of the conversation and to provide her opinion if there were any problems.

They were currently discussing what was known as 3rd-Gear’s first impurity.

Gyes kept her arms crossed as she spoke.

“In other words, Team Leviathan sees no problem with what 3rd-Gear has done in the past?”

Shinjou mentally nodded. Gyes was referring to what they called an “impurity”, but she was intentionally avoiding speaking of it in a negative light. She would refer to it as she just did or as 3rd-Gear’s “policy”.

…That’s the right thing to do from 3rd-Gear’s perspective.

Meanwhile, Sayama made no attempt to show distrust or find fault.

“We will eventually accept the value of every Gear and make them all equal,” he said with his usual expressionless look. “Once that happens, anyone showing hostility to you would qualify as terrorists. Am I wrong?”

“Such terrorists might appear from within your own

organization."

"What will giving into fear accomplish? I ask that you think about this. In our current state, some might indeed rebel, but even we will grow. Who do you think will grow the most in numbers and strength? Predicting a terrible future without even considering that is not even the act of a coward. It is the act of a fool. Even if we are idiots who look to the future, I do not want us to be fools who make eloquent yet ultimately useless arguments. What about you?"

"You certainly are confident. And that is a good point. However…"

Gyes raised her eyebrows, but a smile appeared on her lips.

Shinjou understood where that smile came from. Sayama was saying almost the same thing he had once told #4, but something that had not been necessary then was missing here.

"Have you realized that we have no reason to trust what you say?"

Shinjou made sure to write that in her notes and added her own thoughts.

…#4 didn't need this because she trusted Sayama-kun's grandfather.

Gyes did not trust them.

Even if they claimed they would protect 3rd-Gear from other Gear's out for revenge, it was nothing but a verbal promise. And even if they did make a formal agreement, she did not know if they could really guarantee that.

"How can you prove your ability to protect us?" asked Gyes. "And that includes your ability to protect the other Gears if they ask for the same treatment. Protecting the ten Gears will require quite a bit of personnel and funding. And…"

"And even if we provide that personnel and funding, you do not know if we can truly protect you?"

"Yes. For example, those opposed to Low-Gear could frame other Gears with their suicide to show that Low-Gear's protection is not perfect and blame it all on you. What do you have to say about that possibility?"

Shinjou turned to Sayama.

If he could not answer a question like this, it would prove that this was nothing but a verbal promise.

However, Sayama did not immediately answer.

He first loosely folded his arms over his stomach and faced Gyes. He then raised his left hand to his cheek.

“What is this nonsense you are talking about?” he asked. “Ask yourself whether that would actually work.”

●

Sayama saw his words wipe the smile from Gyes’s lips.

Shinjou tilted her head where she sat to the right.

Her current thoughts could help to get Gyes to speak, so he turned toward her to get her to speak.

Shinjou’s shoulders drew back when their gazes met. Drawing focus here seemed to make her nervous because she glanced toward Gyes and held her notes to her chest.

“U-um,” she finally said.

“Speak. Gyes-kun is waiting too.”

“O-okay… Um, Sayama-kun? Gyes-san was asking whether we can protect 3rd-Gear or not. So why are you turning the question to 3rd-Gear?”

“That is simple, Shinjou-kun. They will be the ones protecting 3rd-Gear.” Sayama turned to Gyes before continuing. “Let me make this clear. Even if every Gear joins us, UCAT and Low-Gear do not have the land and money needed to protect and look after all of them. That was proven with 1st-Gear. At most, we can construct a reservation.”

“Then what will you do!?” Gyes placed her hands on the table. “Was everything you just said nothing more than an ideal!? Are you going to make an unrealistic excuse about never reaching the future without having ideals!?”

“Which one of us is being unrealistic, automaton? Are your eyes defective?” Sayama sighed. “What a pain. I have been using the word ‘we’ this entire time. What about you, Gyes-kun?”

“I have done the same.”

“No, it is not the same.”

Sayama moved the hand on his cheek to point forward while glancing at the ring on his left middle finger.

“When you say ‘we’, you refer to the people of 3rd-Gear.”

He moved his finger again, but he pointed down rather than at

himself.

"When I say 'we', I refer to us, you, and the people of every other Gear."

"Ah," said Shinjou.

…Shinjou-kun has realized what I am trying to say.

But he did not relax. He found it only natural that Shinjou would catch on. The person standing before him still did not understand, so he opened his mouth and spoke to that frowning face.

"Do I have to spell it out for you? If 3rd-Gear is completely protected by Low-Gear, it means 3rd-Gear is under Low-Gear's control and is thus in a lower position."

"…"

"The Leviathan Road will make all Gears equal and Low-Gear is no exception. But we are not foolish enough to accept nothing but losses. We will compensate for it a bit. …And Low-Gear will of course also help the other Gears compensate, but it will not do anything more than that. In other words, protect yourself. You are old enough to get back up on your own if you trip, are you not? Or do you need to be helped to your feet by the Gear said to be the lowest?"

"Are you telling us to work on our own to make up for what you idealists lack?"

"Then no one will owe anyone anything. Low-Gear's end is coming on December 25 of this year, so how about we save each other from that ending? Your gods of war are especially desirable. Also, I am sure plenty of other Gears will want that kind of defense even if they have to pay. While you are at it, how about you prepare a god of war Santa costume for the coming ending?"

Gyes gave a small smile with her eyebrows still raised, but that smile soon vanished.

"But in that case, how do we establish the justness of our self-defense? Some would likely be happy if we were attacked and destroyed by terrorists. And if we attempt to defend ourselves, won't some side with the terrorists based on what has happened in the past?"

"There is no need to question that. It *will* happen," agreed Sayama. "If anyone could deny that, they would have to be a god or me."

For some reason, Shinjou quickly began erasing the line she had just written.

“Shinjou-kun, you must not alter what was said.”

“I’m not altering it. I’m making sure it isn’t recorded.”

Shinjou then sighed and asked a question.

“What are we supposed to do if people criticize 3rd-Gear’s self-defense like that?”

“That is simple. The Leviathan Road provides one thing other than the physical support.”

Namely…

“A modest amount of justification.”

“What?”

“Did you not realize this? Once every Gear has fallen in step, they will no longer be walking at different paces. The only difference will be the size of our feet. Thus, if any group makes such ridiculous criticisms and attempts to throw off our common pace, they can be ignored or rejected. Wield your power, 3rd-Gear, so that you walk forward along with us.”

“I see,” said Gyes with a nod. “Well said.”

But then her voice rose to a shout.

“Are you using all these nice-sounding words for nothing more than making mercenaries out of us!?”

●

Gyes laughed.

…I see. So that’s it. In the end, Low-Gear really is just a Gear with no power.

Something came to her mind. It was the scenery she saw whenever she left the base to walk into town. The residents of that world had developed a mechanical civilization to make up for their lack of concept powers, but those machines had no wills of their own and they broke down easily. Their ultimate destination was a pile of trash.

That thought led her mechanical mind to produce more laughter.

“Ha ha. Yes. A world that uses and disposes of valuable machines on a daily basis truly is different. And now that you have discovered us – living machines which are even more valuable – are you planning to use and dispose of us in your coming battles!?”

She let out a shout.

“If so, feel some shame, Low-Gear!”

But then the boy named Sayama reacted to the words she had thrust at him.

“Is that so?” he asked quietly.

As she wondered if he had something to say, he crossed his arms.

After a pause, he spoke.

“Feel some shame?” His emotionless voice continued. “Then I will feel that shame as a representative of humanity and use you as mercenaries.”

“What?”

She could not comprehend what he had said. She analyzed the words further before speaking.

“Are you going to sell us into slavery in exchange for a single boy’s shame!?”

“That is an amazing bargain for getting me to feel shame.” He nodded with his arms still crossed. “It is a wonderful story of self-sacrifice. The greatest god of war force of any Gear would be under my control. My name would go down in Low-Gear history.”

As he spoke, a smile formed on his lips.

And he laughed.

But then he continued.

“Listen. Use and dispose of? An excellent phrase, Gyes-kun.”

“Do you realize that is a provocation against the machines of 3rd-Gear?”

“It is the truth, so there is not much I can do about it. Now, Gyes-kun, we live in a world of waste. Recycling? Economical? Environmental improvement? None of those are meant to improve this world. It is all an excuse for more waste. And in the end, the machines are sent to the Tartaros known as the trash dump and they become a part of our earth. So, Gyes-kun, I will feel shame as you have asked. …Ahh, I am ashamed to admit just how wonderful this world is.”

He took a breath before speaking again.

“If you have an issue with that, feel shame for all the fuel you have consumed in the past!!”

●

“I cannot accept your objection.”

Sayama spoke to Gyes whose eyebrows were raised.

…Such a ridiculous original sin argument.

“Machines, fuel, wind, water, earth, and everything else are items to be used in this world. Even people, Gyes-kun. It is only those we have connections to that we make graves for and record memories of, but after a few generations, those connections to the past vanish and even the most detailed records become nothing but reading material. That is all there is to it. In the end, even we are nothing more than fuel that is used to move this world little by little. There is nothing more or less than that.”

To his left were the black sea, the sky, and the lights of a city.

“But does the earth wish for more than that? Does the wind? Or the sea? Do the lights of that city wish for more? …Do you wish for something more than being fuel that moves the world with a will of your own?”

He took a breath.

“If that is worthy of feeling shame, then I hope the entire world enjoys shame. That is why I must request something from you. What matters most is not to immediately seek gratitude. It is to do what you are meant to do. Go ahead. We will walk down the Leviathan Road, eliminate the grudges of the Concept War, and travel to somewhere new.”

“Hah.” Gyes shook her head. “Do you think you’re creating a new era?”

“Make no mistake, automaton. An era is not so easily created that we alone can do so. Also, the Leviathan Road will not appear on the surface of history.”

“Then why would you claim you will travel to somewhere new? Aren’t you reveling in self-satisfaction over creating a new era and guiding us there?”

Sayama let out a sigh. He could improve his position in the negotiation by pointing out she was straying from the topic at hand, but he had decided his position would not truly improve unless he answered the question.

And so he spoke.

“We are simply travelling to somewhere new without looking back. We have no intention of remaining there or waving our flag.

Our names will not remain and we will likely be unable to do anything beyond proving people can travel there."

"Unable?" asked Shinjou.

Sayama nodded at that question that was asked with ends of the eyebrows lowered.

"Yes, Shinjou-kun. Even once the Leviathan Road is over, a few members of Team Leviathan – you and me included – will still have our studies to complete. We will go as far as we can and then step down for the sake of our own futures. We can then tell the adults that they should be able to do an even better job if children were able to make it that far."

He gave a bitter laugh.

"I wonder how rich the world will have grown by the time we are adults."

●

Shinjou looked at Sayama.

She realized he was right. The Leviathan Road had to end within the year.

There would likely be some things left to do afterwards, but there were other things they had to do for their own lives: school and the other learning needed for life.

Sayama turned to Gyes and spoke.

"Team Leviathan is an independent unit. Once the Leviathan Road is complete, it will disband. And UCAT is not an army. They can request we participate in later jobs, but they cannot force us."

"Are you saying you will do whatever you like and then escape responsibility?"

"We have no intention of escaping. We will simply step down. Nothing will disappear. If you hold a grudge, feel free to attack. If we failed in anything, feel free to criticize. But regardless of that, we will have high hopes for the adults." He nodded. "And we will have high hopes for ourselves once we become adults. I wonder what we will do in the future. Some will likely move all around the world, some will likely stay in UCAT to perform political activities with the other Gears, and some will likely nap with their beloved while watching the peaceful scenery outside their window."

He turned to Shinjou.

“And at least one is likely to work hard as an author.”

That filled Shinjou with panic because she had still been mostly keeping it a secret.

“I-I still haven’t decided if I’ll really become one…or if I want to…”

“Let us leave it at that, Shinjou-kun. And as for another…”

He grabbed the microphone on the desk and took a deep breath.

“I am likely to begin a blissful life of days and nights with Shinjou-kun! We will be inseparable!”

“Waaaah!!” shouted Shinjou as she grabbed the microphone.

That microphone led not just to the entire world but to every other Gear as well.

…Was that just recorded? Was it?

Gyes gave her a confused look, but she ignored it.

“It’s nothing,” she repeated again and again while holding the microphone.

That must have told Gyes something because she sighed and brushed up her hair.

“I see. I now understand Low-Gear’s objective.”

She specified Low-Gear rather than Team Leviathan.

…She isn’t letting this negotiation stop at just Team Leviathan.

It would be a common point of view for every Gear.

Sayama may have realized that because he said nothing about that point.

Gyes gently placed her right hand on the desk and looked to Sayama.

“I will trust you. That is our first agreement.”

An odd sound filled the air. It came from the desk.

Shinjou looked down and saw Gyes’s fingers digging into the desk’s surface. In fact, even her palm had sunk about a centimeter down.

She silently lifted her hand, leaving a rounded handprint behind.

“I used my gravitational control to raise the density along the surface. A fingerprint pattern can be reproduced, but this pressure density cannot be reproduced without my same hand and ability. I will leave this as proof,” she said. “But there is one other problem and it is even more important.”

“Is that the connection between Typhon and Apollo?” asked

Sayama.

Shinjou gasped.

…What is he going to do?

Removing the Concept Core from Typhon would lead to Apollo's death, but the concepts could not be released otherwise and the Leviathan Road would become meaningless.

"…"

Shinjou squeezed the microphone in her hand and wondered if she should switch it off.

That would prevent the world from hearing what Sayama would say, what they concluded, and anything inconvenient therein.

"Do not switch off the microphone, Shinjou-kun."

Hearing his voice, Shinjou looked up.

He had already turned toward Gyes. His face remained expressionless, but she saw a hint of harshness within it. It almost looked like he was angry with Gyes.

…Why is he angry?

Shinjou tilted her head and Sayama spoke as if that had been his cue.

"Removing the Concept Core from Typhon means the death of Apollo, the true representative of 3rd-Gear."

But he did not stop there.

"If we want the Concept Core, we have no choice but to go through with it."

●

Gyes listened to the boy speak.

…Will this boy become our enemy after all?

A voice seemed to respond to that thought.

"What are you trying to do here?"

She saw Sayama cross his arms and tilt his head.

"We must retrieve the Concept Core, but it seems taking it from Typhon means the death of Apollo, the legitimate heir of 3rd-Gear."

"That is correct. But you have no choice but to do so, correct?"

Sayama fell silent.

The silence lasted a few seconds, a dozen, and then over a minute.

With the roar of the sea to her left, Gyes looked at the boy, but he

merely looked back without moving.

…Strange.

She had asked the question, so he had to provide an answer. Those were the rules of a negotiation.

But he merely stood and faced her.

"…"

She was unsure what to make of this, but then she realized what she should do. She should move.

That motion formed words which in turn formed a question.

"What is it? You aren't answering."

"Of course I am not."

"What?"

"Make no mistake, automaton. I asked a question: what are you trying to do here? After that, I merely reiterated the facts. However, you gave no answer to my question and simply said 'that is correct'. That was in response to my reiteration of the facts and not an answer to the question that preceded it."

He lowered his shoulders.

"I will do this again. This is what I was asking: 3rd-Gear, what are you trying to do by linking your representative's death to the retrieval of the Concept Core?"

His voice filled the air. He did not speak loudly, but it had a stillness that drowned out the waves.

"Team Leviathan merely needs the Concept Core, but have you built up a system around your own leader's death all so you can force that death onto us?"

Gyes thought about what he meant.

…I see.

As he had said, 3rd-Gear had been the one to trap Apollo in this cage of death.

"We will merely be taking the Concept Core. If we must kill someone to do so, we have no choice but to kill them. However, our retrieval of the Concept Core and the construction of that murderous system are two different things. We did not try to kill him. It is the ones who built that murderous system that tried to kill him. …Is that not another way to look at this?"

"Are you attempting to justify your actions? You are killing someone either way."

Gyes's comment was only meant to buy time. She needed to prepare the words to reverse the situation while Sayama responded.

…It is true that was what Lady Artemis wished for. But…

She thought about what was truly important to them.

…Lord Apollo's survival.

Just as she began to think about how to accomplish that, a voice reached her.

"Are you thinking, Gyes-kun?"

She raised the head she had subconsciously lowered and found a boy standing there.

He was expressionless as always, but he was looking directly at her.

"You always assumed bringing up your master's death would solve everything, didn't you? But if it is necessary, I will not hesitate to go through with it."

"That is evil."

"To me, evil is a compliment. It feels like a promotion every time the word is spoken to me." He remained expressionless. "So think about this. Rather than relying on the feelings of others, think for yourself. And rather than thinking about your victory first, think about how to protect that which is important to you. That is the decision 3rd-Gear should continue to make and it is what the Leviathan Road desires."

He took a breath.

"And if you require assistance, we will not hesitate to provide it, whether that means preserving life or ending it."

●

Sayama looked at Gyes.

The automaton in a red suit met his gaze.

"…"

And she closed her eyes.

Her behavior caused Shinjou to lower the ends of her eyebrows and tilt her head.

"What is it?"

"It is nothing. I was only thinking," said Gyes. "Thinking about how an automaton can save its master."

“That is simple.” Sayama gave a bitter smile. “If that master is awake, he can think for himself. But what is it you and your fellow automatons have been doing all this time? Haven’t you been protecting his slumber rather than trying to rouse him?”

What is really going on here? wondered Sayama.

According to Greek mythology, Apollo was the son of Zeus and thus in a position to become the next king. However, he was trapped and immobilized by Artemis who had become Typhon.

“Apollo is the sun god. Is it not about time he awoke?”

“There is a way to free Lord Apollo from Typhon’s curse.”

Gyes’s words caused Shinjou’s shoulders to tremble in surprise.

Shinjou looked up toward Gyes who nodded before continuing.

“In fact there are two ways, but one is now impossible.”

“B-but what is it?”

Gyes nodded again.

“The Tartaros. It is made up of the concepts that each individual person of 3rd-Gear controlled one of. In other words…”

“If Apollo and Artemis are taken into the Tartaros as concepts, their death from sixty years ago can be carried out properly?”

“Yes,” said Gyes. “If they are taken into the Tartaros, neither one of them will disappear. They were both headed for death originally. It is not my place to make the decision, but I have determined that is their rightful form.”

“…”

“But the Tartaros Machina needed for that was lost in 3rd-Gear’s destruction. The Concept Core was also split and one half has become an incomplete weapon. That all comes from Lord Cronus’s grudge. He likely intended to prevent any of Lord Zeus’s descendants from remaining with 3rd-Gear.”

Silence fell and Shinjou closed her notes amid the roar of the sea.

“What’s the other way?”

Gyes nodded, raised her head, and gave a smile with the ends of her eyebrows lowered.

“To use a term mentioned a few times in our previous discussion, it is a ridiculous method.”

She asked a question.

“Do you want to hear it?”

She nodded again.

“It is a method that could create a third impurity.”

Chapter 32

“Compensation for a Lie”

Lies are told to obtain something
Something that cannot be obtained with truth
Something that should be cast aside by truth

●

Miyako walked along the catwalk and toward the white giant's back.

Her destination was the cockpit entrance at the center of the six wings.

She thought to herself while the sounds of her feet counted her steps.

…What should I say once that idiot comes out?

"Hi" or "how are you doing" would be too strange. She had seen Typhon on a rampage, so "what are you doing" may have been the best option.

But that was not what she truly wanted to say. She truly wanted to speak about the yellow light that had resided in Typhon's now empty eyes, but she could not put together the words.

"…"

She hesitated, brought a hand to her forehead, and brushed up her hair.

"Ah."

It happened without warning.

Typhon's back separated up and down to reveal a man.

It was Apollo.

His hair was damp, he wore white pants and a white shirt that was open in the front, and he was barefoot.

His face was pale and his lowered eyes were unfocused.

He looked like he had run from something in the rain.

He stepped out onto the catwalk and took a step, but he quickly lost his balance, collapsed forward, and caught himself on the catwalk railing.

He let out a breath while Miyako stared at his hands grasping the railing.

He kept his head lowered, let out another breath, and moved toward her.

He walked, but he was unsteady, he had to lean his waist on the railing too, and it left him gasping for breath just to take it one step at a time.

His sweat fell on the catwalk, but Miyako continued watching him rather than the fallen sweat.

…Why?

She had no words despite planning to say something.

The young man before her could barely walk.

…But he doesn't call for even a single maid.

Why was that?

She then heard the clang as he fell to his knees. His hands had slipped from the railing and his body had shrunk down.

His shoulders rose and fell as air entered and left his lungs in what sounded more like choking than gasping.

He tried to stand up or raise his knees a few times.

"…!"

But he lost his balance and his right shoulder slammed into the railing support. The railing frantically bent its body to absorb the shock, but he used that time to grab the support with both hands.

He tried to pull himself up with his trembling hands, but he could not.

Miyako took a step forward, looked down on him as he gasped for breath, and tried to say something. She opened her mouth to say "are you okay" or "keep fighting".

"Stand up."

Crap, she immediately thought. *That isn't helping.*

But he stopped moving and finally spoke.

"Miyako?"

"What if it wasn't me, you idiot?"

He took another heavy breath and his shoulders resumed rising and falling slowly.

"Sorry, but I don't have time to deal with you. But…did you see? No, you did, didn't you? I only had control for an instant, but I saw you in the moonlight on the shoulder of Gyes's god of war."

He took another breath.

"This is what it looks like to unsuccessfully become the leader of 3rd-Gear, Miyako."

"The leader?"

"You've already heard, haven't you? I can't leave Typhon and this world will be destroyed at the end of its year. The Concept Core is needed to save it, but that Concept Core is what supports me."

He lifted himself up as he spoke.

He moved slowly and trembled all the while, but he managed to

stand while leaning on the railing.

However, his head remained lowered and he spoke toward the floor.

“Kill me and take the Concept Core home with you, Miyako. Being killed by someone is what I want.”

“D-don’t be stupid.”

She reflexively grabbed his collar with her left hand. Because he was leaning forward, she could only grab the left side of his collar and with her wrist reversed.

“You’re the master of this place, aren’t you!? Is this what the king of 3rd-Gear should do!?”

“I am no king!”

She heard the trembling in his shout.

“As heir to the throne, I once had plenty of subordinates and many people surrounding me. My father did terrible things under his rule and assumed it was my duty to cleanse that evil. But…!”

He paused for a breath.

“As the Concept War continued, the people around me vanished. Even my family and my own sister were made into machines! And then I was killed before I could officially take the throne for myself. That should have been the end of it…if I had not survived.”

終わりのクロニクル

He laughed quietly toward the floor and his shoulders shook a little.

"Funny, isn't it? It was all over, but now I have to take the title of king as the sole survivor of 3rd-Gear? I couldn't protect my father, I was protected by my sister, and now the Gear I must protect is hated for its past deeds. In other words, no one is expecting anything of me as king."

With that said, he raised his head and turned his yellow eyes toward her from beyond his disheveled blond hair.

"Why are you crying?"

"Because I envy you, Miyako."

Taken aback, she looked more closely and noticed his damp eyes were narrowed.

"On that night, control returned to me by pure chance. I was surprised to see you when I attempted to recover while being pursued. That was the first time I had seen someone intrude on our battle. When I saw you from the sky, I believe you were drunk and cursing."

"You don't have to remember how pathetic I was."

"I did the same once. And that is why I said this after approaching you."

He opened his mouth and spoke. His translated will reached her, but she also heard the sound. It was the same words in an unknown language she had heard Typhon speak on that night.

"I would like to speak with you, but I suppose that isn't possible."

He laughed again.

"In a way, my wish was granted when Artemis became a mad ruler and protected you."

"You idiot…" she muttered as he laughed again.

She found what she wanted to say. She found so much she wanted to say.

…I'm the same, idiot.

She had more or less gone this far in pursuit of his eye color.

…Just like you, I doubted it was possible.

She then realized what emotion she had felt upon seeing Typhon's yellow eyes.

…It was me.

I saw myself there, she thought. *I saw myself when there's*

something I have to deal with.

"…"

But she could not form the words and only silence and a few tears came out. Apollo nodded and closed his eyes.

"Don't cry, Miyako. We can speak later. I will not hide anything anymore."

With that, strength left his body and he collapsed toward her.

She frantically let go of his collar and caught him.

She did not let go.

…If I don't support him, something will happen inside me.

But he was heavy. He was tall and solid.

"You keep saying you don't want to, but you still put a lot into supporting 3rd-Gear."

He said nothing in response because he had already passed out.

"How about you take a bit of a rest? I can…"

She was unsure what to say next, but finally spoke to the one she felt was the same as her.

"If you don't mind, I can help out."

She took a step back with his weight bearing down on her, but then something supported her back. That something had a hard body.

"Moira 1st?"

"It is not just me."

Miyako turned just her head toward the voice and saw all the maids gathered on the catwalk.

Moira 2nd's repaired body was among them, but she was turned aside and looking away as usual. However, Moira 3rd looked delighted next to her.

That was the answer.

Moira 1st smiled while supporting her.

"Welcome again to 3rd-Gear, Lady Miyako. Give us your instructions."

"Sure." Miyako nodded and the motion knocked a tear from the corner of her eye. "Is there a way to remove Typhon's curse from this idiot?"

"There are two."

The maid's immediate reply caused Miyako's eyebrows to rise, but the smile had vanished from Moira 1st's face. Her eyebrows

were flat and the look in her eyes sharp.

"The first is to send Lord Apollo and Lady Artemis to the Tartaros as thought entities, but the device needed for that was lost in 3rd-Gear's destruction. The other way…" She paused. "Is to sacrifice you."

"What?"

"It is a simple matter. Lady Artemis exists permanently within Typhon. You only need to combine with Typhon and overwrite her. We can perform the necessary tasks based on the records of the past, so it is a viable method."

The term 'viable method' led Miyako to ask a question while ignoring the mention of herself.

"Is there something needed beyond just the method?"

"Yes. That is something we cannot do and only you can do: have feelings for Lord Apollo. The union with a god of war is accomplished with one's thoughts. Lady Artemis is controlling Typhon with her desire to escape the fear of death and her feelings for Lord Apollo. You would need to surpass those." Moira 1st paused. "But out of concern for you, I must ask that you do not do this."

"D-don't be stupid! If you say it like that, I'm definitely gonna do it."

"But if I asked you to do it, you would accept. That is what I have determined. You always defy what people tell you to do, but you will not overlook another's suffering. In this case, both a refusal and a request would be no more than a challenge to you. In that case, I will express my true thoughts and refuse it."

And…

"This is the same as what Lord Apollo once did. He was unable to abandon Lady Artemis when she lamented becoming a machine, so he made her his navigator."

●

"If the control system and synchronization are redone after someone with feelings for Lord Apollo overwrites Lady Artemis and becomes Typhon, Lord Apollo will be freed from the curse."

Gyes heard Shinjou gulp and saw the girl turn toward her.

"But if you do that…"

"The woman will be unable to leave Typhon and handing over the Concept Core will kill her in Lord Apollo's place. This method could be referred to as Low-Gear supplying its own human resources for the release of the concepts, but from the discussion so far, I assume that would not be acceptable."

Gyes stepped back from the desk, looked at Shinjou and Sayama, and smiled.

"I never expected to form this expression here, but I thank you. And please listen. For the next 24 hours, we will consider our options for saving 3rd-Gear's king and returning him to his rightful form. And whatever our answer might be, we will engage you in combat while prioritizing that decision."

"Eh?"

Gyes turned toward Shinjou and looked to the microphone in her hand.

Gyes had been thinking about what she should do for 3rd-Gear as an automaton.

…To uphold my honor as an automaton, I must do my very best to keep my master from bearing those crimes.

"I make this announcement to every Gear. We will consider our options while thinking of our master and nothing else. However, we will let our master make the final decision for himself. I believe that he can decide his own path. Also, our reason for fighting is simple."

She took a small breath, pulled pen and paper from her pocket, and wrote on it.

"This is our final request for you in this negotiation. We cannot lie, but can you still have me lie and take credit for the crimes committed by our master?"

Shinjou's shoulders trembled when she read the note. She quickly set down the microphone and wrote on her loose leaf paper while continuing to face Gyes.

"So you and the other automatons will bear 3rd-Gear's impurity?"

Gyes smiled again.

It was common knowledge that automatons could not lie, but if they could make it happen here…

"This conversation is being recorded by the world's UCATs in real time, so our words will be accepted as truth and become

common knowledge. Can you do it?"

The boy responded with a certain action.

He nodded and pulled a notepad from his pocket.

●

Shinjou thought it was not possible. Excluding tactical feints, an automaton's mechanical decisions were made to maintain absolute truth. Overturning that would reject such a machine from the very core.

But, she thought. *Will it be possible with Sayama and Gyes who has shown something resembling emotion?*

Gyes had shown an opening in this recorded negotiation: writing. Their voices were being recorded, but communicating via text was simple.

Sayama crossed his arms with the sea roar in the background and turned an expressionless look in Gyes's direction.

"Now then. I was feeling dizzy and stopped speaking for a moment there. Shinjou-kun was quite rough last night and it seems to be catching up to me."

"I-I was not-…"

"3rd-Gear's fate is on the line. Saying anything to rouse the suspicions of those listening would be dangerous."

"Kh."

Shinjou clenched her teeth, thought for a moment, and forced a smile.

"Y-yes, I was at your home rather than my usual bed, so I-I tossed and turned pretty roughly!"

"Why are you so good at running away?"

She ignored him and he turned back to Gyes.

"Let us continue speaking. First, you say you have a reason to fight us separate from your master, correct? But…"

He brought his right hand to his forehead with an exaggerated motion and raised a finger on his left hand.

"Listen, Gyes-kun. Let me guess what that reason is."

After setting the stage to give his answer, he fell silent.

He was likely thinking how to pin the automatons as the ones behind the impurity of the past.

But what he suddenly said surprised Shinjou.

“You automatons were the true ringleaders behind the slaughtering and kidnapping committed by 3rd-Gear in the past and you wish to take responsibility by using the battle with us as your gallows.”

“!?”

It was sudden and without any kind of strategy.

When asked about a complete lie like that, an automaton could only give a single response.

…Automatons can’t lie!

Gyes held her mouth when she almost denied that accusation, but she did not stop herself in time.

“That is a lie!” she shouted.

She slammed her fist against the table, bared her teeth, and trembled. By denying that accusation, she was admitting to her masters’ crimes.

But Sayama held out his hand which contained some writing.

“Leave this to me.”

Both Gyes and Shinjou frowned at that and he spoke.

“Sorry. I seem to have worded that poorly. I also failed to explain how I reached that conclusion. Perhaps the terms ‘ringleader’ and ‘gallows’ were inappropriate when not referring to humans. I can see how being treated as the same humans as your master would feel disrespectful and thus produce a negative reaction.”

He took a breath.

“Now, let me explain my reasoning. I first considered that humans are intrinsically good. While investigating 3rd-Gear’s past, I found their actions inhuman and thus questioned them. I suspected that information contained some distortion to the truth.”

Shinjou watched as Sayama showed Gyes his notepad.

“Say, ‘Continue speaking. If you disgrace my master, I will treat you appropriately.’ ”

“Continue speaking. If you disgrace my master, I will treat you appropriately.”

“Yes, that servant’s spirit is what stood out to me. As 3rd-Gear filled with pathetic failures and could no longer have children, I began to wonder what the master-worshiping automatons would do for those masters.”

Ah, thought Shinjou.

Sayama nodded once while facing her.

“Let me ask you one thing. The people of 3rd-Gear were your masters during the Concept War, but you never had a master from another Gear, did you?”

“That is correct.”

“Then did 3rd-Gear’s automatons ever begin to think they could treat other humans however they liked if it was for their masters’ sake?”

Gyes brought a hand to her mouth.

She could not lie and Sayama had asked about a falsehood concerning the automatons.

…What is he going to do!?

Shinjou watched as he held out his notebook.

“Gyes-kun, say ‘that is correct’.”

Gyes opened her mouth.

“…”

The decision to tell the truth took priority over the decision to answer with a lie.

“Can you not simply say ‘that is correct’?”

Gyes looked like she was enduring pain as she nodded.

She then opened her mouth in preparation to speak the truth.

Just as Shinjou thought it was all over, Sayama rewrote his previous request.

“Gyes-kun, pronounce the words ‘that is correct’.”

“!”

Rather than speaking words with meaning, she would be mechanically uttering the sounds.

“That is correct!” she shouted.

Sayama suddenly wrote something in his notepad, tore it out as quietly as possible, and handed it to Shinjou.

He gave her two papers and she read the first.

“If I give you a signal, rewrite what the bottom paper says in your own words and show it to Gyes-kun.”

Wondering what it said, she tilted her head and looked at the bottom paper.

As soon as she read it, her mouth stretched horizontally.

●

Gyes saw Shinjou shrink down, but she held a note out toward Sayama.

"We have established that we viewed the life of other Gears more lightly and that can be used as a reason for us committing the crimes. However, you have not yet had us admit to 3rd-Gear's actual crimes. It all comes down to this, but automatons like us can learn. That previous trick will not work a second time."

He nodded, but immediately spoke.

"I see. So you viewed the humans of other Gears as worthless and suggested to the humans of 3rd-Gear that those humans of other Gears be treated as machine parts. The humans were naturally hesitant to do so, but did you perhaps prioritize your feelings for those masters and liberally interpret their lack of an outright denial as authorization to act on your own?"

"…"

Gyes's mechanical mind once more told her to deny it, but Sayama smiled before she could.

"Hold on there. I am not done yet, Gyes-kun. Please do not give the truth now and ruin my fun as I show off my reasoning."

That put off her denial and Gyes wrote another note.

"That dodged the issue well enough, but it will not work next time either."

"I will finish this next time, Gyes-kun."

"Anyway, you did all the work yourselves. By the time the humans tried to stop you, you had already acted and it was too late. The other Gears never imagined the automatons would act on their own, so they assumed 3rd-Gear's humans were behind it. As such, you made the following decision: the crimes had been committed by the automatons who served the people of 3rd-Gear rather than by the people themselves, so to protect your current master, you will cut your ties with that master and take all responsibility by challenging us to a battle that risks your destruction."

Gyes could not answer those quiet words that filled the air.

Her mind told her to deny his lie.

She wished what he said was the truth. She wanted to take all the responsibility on themselves and free Apollo.

"…!"

But when she opened her mouth to speak, it was a denial that

threatened to leave it.

She wanted to say no. She wanted to say he was speaking complete nonsense.

Sayama then held out a note.

"Can you pronounce the words 'The Great Sayama is exactly right. Long live the Great Sayama'?"

She could not. She wrinkled her brow, brought a hand to her mouth, and shook her head.

An automaton's ability to learn was very adaptive. Even when changing the words used, the same trick would not work. Plus, these specific words contained a nuance that made her even less willing to speak them.

…Kh! And I only need to say three simple words: that is correct!

She was at her limit. The denial was on her lips.

She opened her mouth and she breathed deep into her speech device.

Just as she was going to yell "no", Sayama pointed to Shinjou.

The girl had spread a scrap of paper between both hands to show Gyes.

"Gyes-san, are you having trouble? Are you?"

Gyes shouted back her answer.

●

"That is correct, you idiot!!"

Gyes shouted and slammed her fists against the table so hard it broke.

Shinjou watched her beyond the scattering splinters. She breathed calmly while looking up into the sky with fists lowered. Shinjou hid the paper in her pocket and once more realized how Gyes truly felt.

"Is that what the automatons want?"

Gyes did not answer. Instead, she gave Sayama a resolute look.

"We will make this our final battle."

Hearing that, Shinjou's eyebrows lowered.

…Does she think this way because she's a doll?

Shinjou wished Gyes could be human and thought about who would think the way Gyes did.

"You really are kind, Gyes-san. And you really are cruel, Gyes-

san.”

She had not even meant to speak out loud and the automaton turned toward her.

Gyes’s eyebrows rose in surprise for an instant, but she soon formed a small smile.

“That is true, but the human who recently came to our base treats us as if we are people. So is it that strange for us to go this far, not as dolls but as people?”

Shinjou recalled the name of someone she had never met.

…Tsukuyomi Miyako.

That was Tsukuyomi’s daughter. Sayama must have realized that as well because he lightly raised a hand and snapped his fingers to gather Gyes’s attention.

“Come to think of it, a ‘guest’ from Japanese UCAT is currently staying in your base.”

“Yes. A member of 2nd-Gear is with us as a ‘guest’. I believe her surname is Tsukuyomi. She is doing well. She makes selfish decisions, but she is working to better 3rd-Gear.”

“Is that so? But what will she do during your battle in 24 hours?”

“She will follow her own decision. She is working for the sake of 3rd-Gear, so we will not restrain her or force her to go free.”

Sayama nodded at that immediate answer and Gyes moved a moment later.

Her red suit fluttered as she turned her back and the surrounding distortion vanished.

Next, the roar of the sea and the blowing of the wind suddenly grew louder.

“Ah…”

By the time the sudden gust of wind made Shinjou shudder, Gyes had moved away.

She walked across the beach and raised a hand.

“Please play along with our battle of dolls in 24 hours’ time.”

With that, she leaped into the sky and vanished into the moonlight.

Chapter 33

“Growing Closer on the Board”

If you advance game pieces along the board
Where do you place yourself to advance?
Whether travelling to the past or the future, your heart will occasionally advance

●

The movements of the sun and moon could not be seen underground, but the clock on the wall gave an indirect look.

The clock in UCAT's development department gave the current time as 10:21 AM. Below the clock were the large director's desk and a woman in a lab coat who held a phone receiver to her ear.

It was Tsukuyomi. She toyed with her unkempt gray bangs as she spoke.

"That daughter always was trouble. Yes, Sayama, thank you for calling. Don't worry. This can be in exchange for the documents we gave you. Nothing's more frightening than getting something for free."

All of the partitions before her were filled. The people inside had been working night and day without rest to restore the servers and help the other departments with the aftermath of the attack.

A few people were watching her from above the partition walls. They looked worried, so she smiled and gestured for them to sit.

"Honestly, I'm so busy that I'm more worried about myself than her." She then spoke to Sayama through the phone. "Are you at the Port of Mizushima right now? And you're going to set up a formation near Kurashiki, right? You must be busy too. Anyway, use all of the documents Kashima sent you as your summer homework, including the ones you can't read." She laughed. "I'm sure the higher ups know. That's why I'm going to offer the data from our 'emergency backup' to help restore the central server."

His response made her smile bitterly, but that smile quickly vanished.

For a while, she only nodded as he spoke.

"Hey, is anyone here fairly knowledgeable about gods of war?" she shouted to the partitions.

One middle-aged technician in the back stood up and she asked a question before he could speak.

"If a god of war is powered by a Concept Core, what happens when that Core is removed from it?"

"In short, it no longer functions. It dies."

"Can it be started up again?"

"No. Gods of war are like living creatures. They always exist in a

faint standby state. If that is eliminated, their components slow, deteriorate, and then die. Once the circulation is cut off, great damage is done to the internal systems and anyone synced with it will be in danger."

"I see. Thanks," said Tsukuyomi while motioning for the technician to sit.

A voice reached her as soon as she pressed the receiver back to her ear and she made a few responses.

"Don't act so surprised. I didn't know you could make such human complaints."

She gave a bitter laugh.

"Ha ha. You should show that side of you to your teammates more often. You're essentially Team Leviathan's king after all. …Right. Now do your best and don't worry about my daughter."

●

Huh? thought Miyako.

She was currently on a bed in a dimly-lit room. More importantly, she was not wearing any clothes. Next to her, Apollo had yet to fully remove his own clothes.

"How did things end up like this?"

She had carried him to his room after he collapsed, but her mistake had been falling asleep while lying next to him. When she had woken up past noon, he had also woken, so they had been forced to face each other as they ate the food left by Moira 1st. Afterwards, Apollo had fallen asleep again. It was currently mid-afternoon, but the window was shut and the room only contained a faint light.

Miyako recalled the plate Moira 1st and the other maids had used to leave a note.

"They're preparing for a sort of festival, are they?"

She did not quite understand, but the maids who occasionally came to speak with Apollo seemed to be enjoying themselves. Apollo's tearful face from the night before had vanished and he conversed with the maids while showing a comfortable expression lacking any excess concern.

Currently, he spoke next to her.

"Do not worry, Miyako. This should not be a bad thing."

“Why did I end up stripped down before you? Answer me.”

“Because you had fewer pieces of clothing.”

“No. It’s because you were in such a rush to take them all off me. And you looked pretty happy doing it, I might add.”

While she was not satisfied with his answer, she also wondered if they should be doing this.

“H-hey…”

She realized she had never had a proper conversation with him.

“Let us talk, Miyako.”

“Don’t steal my line.”

She raised her voice and blushed, but Apollo only laughed and approached from the side.

“I would like to hear about your family.”

“About my dad?”

“And your mother and you, Miyako. What is a Low-Gear family like?”

He sat next to her with a smile and she pulled up the blanket to hide her body.

“It’s not very interesting.”

“But a family is something I do not know. …The only people I had were a sister who I was to view as a woman, a father who gave me orders, and those who fought.”

“…”

“I would often look at my father and decide I did not want to turn out like him. I would wonder why I had to follow his orders. Whenever I disobeyed him, he would say it was for my own good.”

That made Miyako laugh and Apollo looked confused.

“I was told the same thing. Everyone else was going to cram school…but you probably don’t know what that is. Anyway, everyone else went, but I didn’t like studying. The thing is, I also didn’t like being separated from everyone else. When he made me go, my dad said that same thing.”

“Ha ha. Why is it that parents try to force happiness onto you?”

“How should I know?” She shrugged. “But those are the only things you remember, aren’t they?”

Apollo nodded.

“It really is unfair. He forced everything onto me and then left without giving me a chance to say anything. …I really don’t want to

end up like him."

"Neither do I." said Miyako. "Anyway, can I change the subject to the present?"

"You mean Typhon?"

"How did you know? Typhon is a part of your family, isn't it?"

Apollo gave a bitter smile.

"You got me there," he said and she held out a hand.

"So what are you going to do about freeing yourself from Typhon's curse?"

Moira 1st had told her the two methods. The first was no longer possible.

…And the second requires my feelings.

According to Moira 1st, the organization named UCAT that her mother belonged to also wanted Typhon's Concept Core.

If she joined with Typhon and the Concept Core was removed, she would die.

She decided now to see if that was actually true.

…Whether I'll actually sacrifice myself is a different issue, though.

As she thought, Apollo opened his mouth to speak.

"I see Moira 1st explained the situation to you. One of the automatons told me earlier."

"Yes. What I know for sure is, if I join with Typhon…"

"No one wants you to do that." Apollo's expression grew serious. "I just thought up a third method."

"Seriously?"

She sat up a little and he shook his head.

"But if I tell you, it will use up all the time I have with you."

"D-don't say that, you idiot. More importantly, that third method…it's nothing bad is it? It doesn't sacrifice anyone, does it?"

"It does not. It frees me from Typhon's curse and makes me a king."

"A king?"

I'm doing nothing but ask questions, she thought as Apollo nodded.

"And when I do, I will take you as my queen."

"D-don't be stupid. I never said I'd marry you."

"I said I would take you as my queen, not *as my wife*. You could be

an honorary queen."

"You son of a bitch!"

He laughed and she bared her teeth for a moment, but she soon sighed.

…I was wondering why he looked so serious.

She clicked her tongue and his smile vanished.

"But do not worry. Moira 1st likely told you what she did so that you would worry for me. …But we have a choice."

"It's a hundred years too early to think about using that choice to make me your wife."

"A hundred years? That isn't long for me."

"You idiot," she muttered before sighing again. "Y'know, it may be a bit late to say this, but I'm kind of a failure."

She lay on her back and looked up at the ceiling. Even the dim orange light seemed bright to her. She crossed her arms in front of her eyes to hide the light.

…The whole reason I ended up here was failing that interview.

Something like a voice came from deep in her chest. The word "regret" filled her mind, but she did not let it show.

…Who regrets not getting into a place they didn't really want to be?

She did not speak that thought aloud, but she did speak her true thoughts. The darkness of covering her eyes made her honest.

"I've made myself sound pretty important while I'm here."

She took a breath.

"But you were right when we spoke below that cliff. I'm staying here because I don't want to go back out into the world."

"Miyako."

"I shouldn't be doing this…"

"Miyako."

She raised her arms and found his face.

At some point, he had lifted the blanket and moved above her, but his face looked somehow twisted.

"Don't cry, Miyako. For some reason, seeing you cry makes me want to cry."

"Sorry. But…"

"Are you nothing but talk, Miyako? Then why did the automatons accept you as their master? Was it your words? Your thoughts? Or

was it your attitude that pushes you ever onwards? Let me tell you this, Miyako. A king who leads the people is someone who possesses all three of those," said Apollo. "That is something I could not do. Thank you."

"I should be the one thanking you, idiot."

Tears spilled from the corners of her eyes and his head lowered.

As she shrank back in surprise, their lips met.

After a few seconds, the wetness took a breath and left, but the heat did not leave her body and cheeks.

She took a breath and moved her legs. She gently held him between her knees and positioned her butt.

"U-um, just to be clear…"

…*Saying this really isn't like me at all.*

"This is my first time. Be gentle, okay?"

"Don't worry, Miyako. It's my first time, too."

"I see," she responded without thinking. "Wait! What was that!? Don't lie to me!! Looking like that, you've gotta be a real lady-killer!"

"I am not lying. To ensure everything goes smoothly, 3rd-Gear omitted the manual labor. Everything was extracted and done outside the body. Also…lady-killer? I do not like killing, especially of women."

"No, a lady-killer is…oh, never mind!"

I've had enough, she thought to herself. *This isn't something where you can try to look good.*

Just as she realized that was not much different from normal, Apollo lowered his body.

"Ah, w-wait a minute."

Her pulse began to race and sweat poured out as if she had been holding it in.

He looked down at her in confusion.

"Y'know, I've read that it rarely turns out well when it's both people's first times."

"Do not worry, Miyako. Long ago, I read in a book how to make sure it turns out well."

"And how many thousands of years ago was that, you idiot? Plus, it's rare these days to see a non-standard product like me produced in Japan, the nation of mass production. What'll you do if something

goes wrong? Also…”

She looked up at the young man above her and made a prediction based on the somehow happy look on his face.

“I couldn’t tell you why I’m so sure, but you’ll succeed this time. Without a doubt.”

“Low-Gear is far more advanced than 3rd-Gear! You can determine someone’s skill just by looking at them!?”

“It’s not about skill! It’s more like an accidental discharge!”

She punched him straight in the face.

He let out a groan before twisting his body and falling toward her.

“Kyah!”

She was surprised how pathetic her own voice sounded. Unlike when she had held him in the hangar that morning, his skin was warm and even the tickling of his hair rested on her.

“…”

She looked around with her hands lifted above her head, but there was of course no one there.

“You idiot…”

She sighed, relaxed, and wrapped her arms around his back and neck.

…I’m doing him a huge favor here.

Once she realized that thought was just a way to hide her embarrassment, she gave a mental sigh. She further relaxed her body, sank into the bed, and matched the curve of her body to his.

“Well, I’m sure a lot will happen, but it should turn out fine. Probably.”

He nodded and raised his head to look her in the eye with his own smiling eyes.

His yellow eyes were not the same color as hers, but they contained the same light.

“Do you think we can become a family?” asked the owner of those eyes.

“That’s fine with me, but I wonder what my mom would say.”

“Oh, that’s right. If we become a family, I gain a mother-in-law. At the very least, we will have a family of three.”

Is that how it works? she wondered.

Based on his past, she guessed why he had said that with a smile

and she empathized with him. Once she did, she could no longer stop her feelings for him.

"But… Don't forget about the Moirai and the other maids. They're family too, aren't they?"

"I will make sure of it in the future. It will have to be through you before I am used to it, though."

He raised his body a bit and stuck his arms under her shoulders and back.

She took a breath to relax and she felt the heat of his breath, but she did not reject it.

…He's sure to make a good king.

She felt Typhon was holding him back. And if the automatons did become his family, who would no longer be needed?

…Me?

They don't need two masters, she realized. *Staying with this idiot as Typhon is still an option, I suppose.*

"You lost your family, didn't you?" she said. "But you never forget your family, you can make a new one, and you can become part of someone else's. Don't you think?"

"That's right."

When he nodded, she continued with a relieved smile.

"Then we really are the same."

●

The sunset was beginning to disappear to the west.

The sky was quite visible in this area.

Fields continued on as far as the eye could see. The only other things visible were the train tracks and a circle of trucks in a large empty lot. The trucks were all loaded with shipping cargo, but what lay in the center of the circle was different.

Lights brighter than the dim sunset illuminated the people standing alongside it.

Three giant armored warriors were loaded onto the back of trucks. Two were colored black and white and contained the UCAT emblem, but the wholly black god of war next to them had no emblem.

Several people were gathered next to the black one. A whiteboard was placed in front of them and a quick map had been

drawn on it by hand. The map was labelled “Kurashiki”.

A large black man spoke in front of the whiteboard.

As he did so, he glanced to the side where two boys and a girl stood.

The boy with sharp facial features and the girl with short hair wore the same white and black armored uniform as the others, but the short boy did not. He wore a black T-shirt, jeans, and a white bandanna.

The bandanna boy spoke the most to the two across from him.

“So Kazami-san, how is Mikage-san?”

“She hasn’t come to yet, but she’ll be driven to Kurashiki ahead of time. Sibyl will be with her, so you don’t have to worry, Hiba. But… should we really bring an injured person to the battlefield?”

Kazami’s eyebrows lowered and she tilted her head.

Hiba could only give a trouble smile in response. *I’m being selfish,* he thought.

“I’m not sure. Maybe I shouldn’t have her with me since she might have given up on me.” He gave a small nod. “But we might settle things with 3rd-Gear, so I think she should be there.”

“I see.”

Kazami nodded and pulled a map of Kurashiki from her pocket.

She faced the boy with a sharp face and looked at Baku on his head.

“Sayama, a question. What’s our plan?”

“I will give a quick explanation. Just look over at the map drawn by that bald man.”

Boldman turned around.

“I can hear you!”

“I was not hiding it, so of course you can. …Now, if you can see that poorly-drawn map…”

Hiba looked over to the equilateral triangle representing Kurashiki.

“Kurashiki can be viewed like this if you use the major roads to divide it up. The top corner is Kurashiki Station and there is an amusement park above it. The bottom right corner is the small mountain containing the Achi Shrine. 3rd’s base is also there, so it is the center of the concept space. We will be entering through the bottom left corner.”

“That’s a long way. Isn’t 3rd’s concept space a little too big?”

“In the late afternoon, UCAT’s Okayama branch detected their concept space expanding. I believe it has a radius of three kilometers. Jumping in near the center risks damage to your string vibration and that map shows the two-lane road leading straight to the Achi Shrine.”

Hiba saw the line leading from the bottom left corner to the bottom right corner.

However…

“Since that’s the shortest path, won’t they be waiting there?”

“That is why we will circle around from above,” said Sayama. “It is going a bit out of our way, but it is more certain. Also, there are a few side roads leading right – that is, east – on the way from the bottom left corner to the top corner. If we run up toward Kurashiki Station and send units down those side roads…”

“They can stop any enemies that might pursue from below.”

“A dummy will be sent out in front in case there are enemies at Kurashiki Station as well. An empty and disguised cargo train will be sent ahead on the track running alongside the road and we’ll travel in a truck while the enemy is distracted by it.”

“What’s my job?” asked Hiba.

Out of their three gods of war, his was the only one with full power.

Sayama answered with his gaze.

He looked to Hiba’s left where the side of a disguised truck had been lifted up and something was being lowered down. Some long objects made of black steel were affixed to pallets. There were three of them, two were sheathed swords, and the third was much longer.

“That is the anti-god of war sniper rifle ‘God Piercer’. Our development department remade the world’s very first German anti-tank rifle on the god of war scale. It holds three shots and its effective range is approximately a kilometer. At that range, it can supposedly pierce the armor of three gods of war.”

“I’ve never done much shooting…”

“A specialized auxiliary device was already added at the Kanda Laboratory. If you wield it with Susahito Custom, your aim will be automatically corrected. You have five test shots, so try it out as you

like. Your target will be 3rd-Gear's leader if he attempts to flee. It will likely be a flight-capable god of war, but in the worst case, you will have to shoot Typhon."

Sayama patted his shoulder.

"If Typhon arrives, you handle it. Finish this once and for all."

"You're right. But I explained Typhon's technique before coming here, didn't I?"

He was referring to the movement technique that could eliminate time, but Sayama did not seem interested.

"Do not worry. I have only heard about the technique secondhand, but you can overcome it."

"H-how irresponsible can you be?"

"It is not my responsibility. Also, the technique itself is incredibly simple. All it does is eliminate time. Nothing more. No matter what happens, you must overcome Typhon's technique and win, so you must find a way to reach an opponent who moves while destroying the intervening time."

Sayama raised both his hands in front of his eyes before the left one shot upwards and the right one circled behind him.

"Fortunately, Typhon could not eliminate the time it took to fire as it flew like this. Most likely, that technique must be activated by its opponent's attack."

"By my attack? But why?"

"Maybe to drive away the fear of death," cut in Kazami while tilting her head. "If you represent death to her, Artemis may try to hide herself as a starting point toward driving you away. She wishes to escape that symbol of death. But when attacking, she feels the relief of being able to win and isn't able to eliminate the time."

"That is a decent theory. It does nothing to help us find a strategy, but pondering it could make for a nice break."

Kazami glared at Sayama, but Hiba did not mind.

They could make some guesses about Typhon's attack system and what activated it.

"But that leaves how to break through it."

"You have already been taught how to do that."

"Eh?"

Hiba looked over and saw Sayama pointing to the south. He could no longer see it, but the sea was there.

“You would not have won before traveling there, but Izumo and I taught you a few things. According to my calculations, you should easily be able to overcome Typhon. So let me irresponsibly tell you to do your best.”

Hiba gave a bitter smile because he had a feeling he might actually manage.

Sayama would only talk about what they needed to do to win, but he had made a phone call with a serious expression back at the port. Kazami had speculated he was calling Tsukuyomi or someone about a way to save Apollo and Hiba found himself trusting the boy.

…What is with this trust? I don’t really get it.

“Sayama-san, do you think there’s a way to save Apollo?”

“I do not know. That is 3rd-Gear’s problem and we have very little information,” he said. “But I do wonder if the previous rulers of 3rd-Gear were truly the mad kings they were said to be. Zeus did not view people as human and Cronus resented Zeus for imprisoning him and tried to destroy him. That may be how the father/son relationship works, but is that truly how they were?”

Hiba noticed Sayama’s right hand lightly clutching the left side of his chest.

He did not know why Sayama did that every time he spoke of the past, but he still stopped himself from asking if Sayama’s father had been different. He was afraid he would be intruding on something related to the boy’s chest, so he changed his thoughts.

…How was it with my dad and me?

His father had been strict and had taught him plenty of techniques, but the man had never known Mikage or Hiba as he was now.

“I don’t know what kind of relationship a real father and son have.”

“Neither do I. But that is exactly why I believe my reasoning is correct. If there is a condition, it would be how well you understand Mikage-kun. That will likely determine whether Apollo can be saved or not.”

“Eh?”

Sayama looked at Hiba.

“I am certain the answer has already been given and Cronus probably predicted it.”

“Are you talking about how to save Apollo?”

“Yes. If I am right, Apollo has already been saved. I want you to trust me when I say that. If something does happen, all responsibility will fall on me. As a villain, I will have deceived you and had you kill Apollo. So do not worry and go fight, Hiba boy.”

Hiba was unable to nod. He did not know what Sayama was talking about and he had no reason to believe it.

…Can I really trust him?

But he did have something he could trust: he had lost to them.

And so he spoke without actually agreeing.

“Let’s go. If necessary, we can create an answer out of nothing.”

He then faced the rifle and swords that would be his weapons and found a familiar face next to them. It was a short old man with a bent back.

“Grandfather.”

Hiba Ryuutetsu turned toward him and Hiba sensed a smile in the man’s one red eye.

…Did he ever do anything like this?

Hiba doubled his resolve to settle this and smiled bitterly.

“I’ve prepared myself, grandfather.”

As soon as he said it, something small moved on Sayama’s head.

It was Baku.

●

Sayama stood within the rain. It almost felt like a mist, but it had actual drops to it.

As he passed through the rain with nothing but his vision and hearing, he realized what had happened.

…This is the past.

Where was he?

He looked around and saw a certain scene.

“A battlefield.”

Several forms were visible at the bottom of a broad plain surrounded by mountains. They were machines and buildings. Most had lost their original form and had their frames and supports exposed.

Among the buildings, just one thing had escaped complete destruction.

A passageway continued underground beneath the largest building. It had been a three-story prefabricated building and some massive force had smashed entirely through it, but the floor of the first story and below had survived.

That meant the underground passageway and a giant explosion-resistant door remained.

Sayama saw letters engraved into that door: UCAT JAPAN.

"Japanese UCAT."

He recalled something else he had heard from the past. According to Cronus, 3rd-Gear had planned to work with 9th to attack UCAT after they had stolen Rhea's child.

…Is that what happened here?

As far as he could tell, this was a garden of destruction. He belatedly noticed many human forms were collapsed amid it all.

But he also saw a few people moving inside the smoke. Those were the survivors.

How great a force had attacked and how much damage had been done? This was UCAT rather than the National Defense Department, yet it had been so thoroughly destroyed.

"It must have been quite a battle."

However, the explosion-resistant door leading underground had held.

The evacuated local residents and research items were likely inside.

Sayama then saw something odd. A strange darkness was located in the air near the center of the rain-covered destruction.

It was a gate to another Gear.

He moved toward it and found it was black, tall, and emitting a faint shadow-colored light. As he approached, he realized it was easily over seven or eight meters tall.

This gate was meant for gods of war.

The enemy had appeared and left through the gate, but its light was weakening.

It was vanishing.

However, Sayama saw some movement below it. They were injured men covered in mud. There were about a dozen of them and they called out to each other while setting barrel-like machines below the gate. Sayama heard them say things like "keep it going"

and “don’t let it vanish”.

…Are they trying to preserve the gate?

There were two giant objects near them.

One was Susahito Custom which had a broken right arm.

The other was a blue and white machine even larger than the god of war. It was a mechanical dragon and the Stars and Stripes mark on its side suggested it belonged to American UCAT.

The mechanical dragon was broken and spewing smoke and its windshield was partially opened. A young soldier in a flight suit spoke with blood running down his face.

“We could have managed if we’d had Xolotl 3 here.”

“Wishing for something we don’t have isn’t going to help, Thunderson.”

The response came from below the black god of war. A young soldier sat there with bandages around his right eye and more binding his right arm.

The soldier named Thunderson raised his eyebrows when Hiba stood up.

“Hiba, you idiot. …Are you really going!? That’s enemy territory!”

“You wouldn’t understand. Not when you’re so disheartened.”

Hiba opened the god of war’s stomach with his left hand and pulled out the cockpit door.

“I’m going and I don’t know when I’ll be back.”

He then faced toward Sayama.

He was actually facing the soldier named Thunderson and he gave a muddy smile.

“I’m continuing on, Thunderson. You look toward the place you need to go.”

“Hiba!”

Thunderson tried to fully open the windshield to exit the craft, but the bent frame would not let it open further. He tried a few more times, but found it was hopeless.

“You can’t! If you go, what will happen to Toshi and the others!? Is Mikage more important than them!?”

Rather than reply, Hiba climbed into Susahito Custom’s cockpit and closed the door.

Thunderson moved the control column and the mechanical dragon trembled.

"!"

But its front right leg broke and it fell to the muddy ground, jaw first.

"That's not the issue. It isn't about who's more important."

The black god of war slowly stood up.

The wings on its back were broken, but it turned around all the same. It whipped up the wind in the rain and headed toward the black gate.

The men adjusting the machines supporting the gate opened a large path and saluted.

Susahito Custom saluted back and spoke to Thunderson.

"You go too. Go to the destination you've prepared for. I'll be going on ahead."

The black god of war took a step forward and vanished.

The rain that had been falling on it now fell through empty space. Meanwhile, a cry rose from the man who had been left behind.

As that roar filled the air, Sayama felt as if he had been thrust backwards.

The past was ending.

…And this is where it truly began.

This was where 3rd-Gear's destruction had begun.

●

Hiba looked up in surprise.

The light of sunset surrounded him and the sounds of truck engines and speaking voices returned. That sudden noise surprised him and the old man before him scratched his head.

"Oh, no. …I'm not sure how to put it, Ryuuji, but wasn't I pretty cool there?"

"No, you had nothing of my youthful spirit."

The two of them smiled bitterly and Sayama tapped Hiba on his shoulder.

"Hiba boy, Hiba-sensei, I am sure you have plenty to discuss. Go take a break."

When Ryuutetsu agreed, Sayama and Kazami nodded expressionlessly before leaving.

Ryuutetsu suddenly looked to the left toward the rifle, the swords, and Susahito Custom beyond them.

“Ryuuji, what are you going to do about Mikage?”

“Good question… Once this is over, I can discuss it with her.”

“You’ve learned a lot, haven’t you? About the past, what you’ll do from now on, and what you’ve been doing until now.”

“Yes,” said Hiba with a nod. “And I’m not the only one who’s been thinking about a lot, am I?”

“Of course not. It’s a bit late to be figuring that one out. …So what’s your answer?”

“I don’t have one,” he answered. “But I want to protect her no matter what.”

“You sound like a stalker.”

“Why do you have to say that!?”

“Calm down, calm down.”

Ryuutetsu walked forward, passed by Hiba, and faced Susahito Custom.

“There’s nothing wrong with not giving an answer and continuing to worry. That can be an answer in and of itself.”

“Were you not allowed even that?”

“You don’t think the elderly always have pasts filled with tragedy, do you?”

He turned around with a smile in his red eye and Hiba swallowed what he was going to say next, but Ryuutetsu narrowed his eyes further.

“Ryuuji, there’s a lot that isn’t easy, but those are the truly important things. The most valuable things I taught you were the peeping techniques and how to take care of Mikage. You need to continue questioning everything and continue choosing what you can. As long as you do that…”

He scratched his head.

“You might make mistakes, but you won’t do anything wrong.”

“Grandfather…”

“What?”

“Just now, you were a little cooler than me. Like the length of a pinkie’s fingernail more. Like this.”

“Ryuuji, you cut all your fingernails down as far as they’ll go.”

“That’s because Mikage-san says it hurts when I’m washing her in the bath and my nails touch her.”

The old man suddenly punched him.

Chapter 34

“Battlefield of Farewells”

Let’s go
Let’s go
To the place that calls to us

●

Miyako opened her eyes.

She had apparently fallen asleep and the cloth-like sensation wrapped around her up to the shoulders was a 3rd-Gear blanket.

After a few breaths, feeling returned to her body and her pulse throbbed in the left temple that was touching the blanket. She was currently on her side with the blanket up to her shoulders.

"Nn…"

Her dim vision saw the faint light of the room, white sheets, and…

…Apollo.

He lay on his side while facing her, but his eyes were closed and he seemed to be sleeping.

She thought about touching his defenseless face.

"…"

She decided against it, but she let out a breath that did not feel bad at all.

"I don't know what I'd say if I woke him."

"Hey" or "morning" would sound strange, but tapping him on the shoulder and saying "you gave it a good effort, boy" was a little too oddly fitting.

…More importantly, what time is it?

She did not know. She had slept with Apollo just before evening. Despite everything that happened and then sleeping for a bit, she doubted it was very far into the night. After all, the man sleeping before her eyes had not yet been called by Typhon.

"But then why did *I* wake up?"

She would wake up when she had plans, but she would just let herself sleep otherwise and there was no sign of him having touched her after she fell asleep.

"?"

She slowly sat up as she realized something was off.

She carefully crawled across and off the bed while making sure the blanket on him did not move.

She was not wearing anything, but she saw some clothes on the bedside table. Moira 1st or someone had likely prepared them.

…I wish they hadn't seen me like that.

But she stood with a genuine smile and dressed. Some parts of

her body ached a little from using muscles she did not normally use, but that pain only strengthened her smile as she passed her arms through the sleeves.

She turned around and saw he was still sleeping with a peaceful expression.

…That's for the best.

She nodded.

"If I join with Typhon, you can sleep like that every night. You can walk onward with the automatons…and become a king."

She turned her back, shook her hair, and opened the door without looking back. She entered the hallway to find Moira 1st or Gyes and tell them what she wanted to do.

She wanted to finish it before Apollo woke.

However, she found something unexpected in the white hallway with red carpet.

"There's no one here?"

What's going on? she wondered as she quickened her pace toward the emergency exit.

"…?"

At that point, the sense that something was off returned to her.

"It's shaking?"

Something down below was shaking the building with a set tempo.

…The gods of war!

Before she could think, her impatient reflexes sent her into a run toward the emergency exit.

Something was happening. A single god of war would not cause this much of a tremor.

"What is this?"

She took a breath and moved her arms, but strength left her knees after a few steps and she collapsed. It was partially due to having just woken up, but she was truly having trouble using her body.

"Shit," she swore while placing a hand on the wall and using that to balance herself as she ran.

After turning a few corners, some wind reached her. The darkness of the night lay directly before her and the city nightscape formed the borderline between earth and sky.

She left the building and stepped onto the emergency elevator.

She looked down while catching her breath and forcing her weak knees to stand.

"Lady Miyako."

Far down below, she heard Moira 1st's voice and saw a familiar sight.

That sight was the many maids and the gods of war.

There were eight green gods of war with their back and shoulder thrusters lit and warping the air. Moira 1st looked up at her from the center of them all.

"Lady Miyako! Congratulations! You can prepare your own sekihan tonight!"

"You idiot, that's the wrong tradition! That was over a decade ago for me!"

…And that's not why I'm here.

"What are you doing!?" she shouted through the blowing wind.

"UCAT is attacking."

"What?"

"This is a festival. 3rd-Gear's final festival. We will handle everything, so you run away with Lord Apollo!"

Miyako shouted down at Moira 1st's smile. Her eyebrows rose and she grabbed the railing.

"You idiots! Do you know what decision I want to make here!?"

"Running away is an acceptable choice, Lady Miyako."

"But you're going to fight, aren't you!? You're maids, so *can* you even fight!?"

"3rd-Gear automatons are the greatest of any Gear. We may have areas we are less skilled in, but that does not mean they are impossible for us." Moira 1st narrowed her eyes. "We will buy you some time and we will achieve victory. We will also take all responsibility, so you elope in Typhon with Lord Apollo!"

"You can't call it eloping if it's officially approved!"

"Wh-whatever you want to call it, just make sure there is something of 3rd-Gear left over!"

"What are we, the uneaten part of a meal!? But those can be good with some hot rice, so remember that."

"We will! And I will trust that we can eventually serve it."

Moira 1st closed her eyes in a smile.

"We have told you what we want, Lady Miyako. You are the one

who gave us names and taught us to sing, so perhaps we really should refer to you as our princess."

Moira 1st bowed and Miyako tried to stop her with a shout.

…Once that bow ends, they'll disappear!

But there was a small smile on Moira 1st's face when she raised her head. That smile was less perfect, less neat, and more crooked than any she had given before.

"We will be taking a short break from our duties," she said.

In that moment, all of the maids bowed and began to run in unison. They ran through the forest, down the mountain, and to the city. To the battlefield.

They vanished.

And as if that was their cue, the eight gods of war kicked off the ground.

Eight roars shot through the air.

"!"

Those eight warriors flew quickly into the sky and toward the city. They drew paths of wind, clouds trailed them, and they flew into that night scenery.

All that remained were the wind, the scattering leaves of the trees, and…

"Dammit," groaned Miyako.

"Huh? What're you doing here, Miyako?"

She turned around and found the short maid named Moira 3rd.

"What are *you* doing here? The others already left."

…Not that I want any of you to go.

Moira 3rd nodded.

"Yeah, how should I put it? I had a quick job to do."

"A job?"

"Yeah, adjusting the concept space. It's been spread out pretty big, after all. This place might be taken over too, so you should leave with Lord Apollo before that happens."

"No need."

Miyako let go of the railing, stood in front of the maid, and took in a breath.

"You know how to sync with Typhon, right?"

"Y-yes, but…"

Moira 3rd stiffened and tilted her head such that her semi-long

hair shook.

"Are you serious, Miyako? It'll probably hurt. How should I put it? It'll be like having your medulla oblongata stirred up by chopsticks."

"Why are you so good at describing things you don't even have? Anyway, this is what I've decided to do."

She glanced down the empty hallway.

"I was whipped into shape here, so I can probably get by even if I leave this place. Even if everything goes wrong, I feel like I can still get by."

"I see. To be honest, we all feel the same way. They're all using our joint memory to say they think we can now do all sorts of things without growing tired of it."

"I see." Miyako smiled, nodded, and gave Moira 3rd a soft look. "But there's one person here who hasn't been turned around yet. And yet it was him that helped turn me around."

"Miyako."

"What?"

"Is he important to you?"

"He is," she answered without hesitation.

"I see," said Moira 3rd with a smile.

She took Miyako's hand from her shoulder and pulled it toward the elevator railing.

Facing that way brought the night scenery into view. Moira 3rd looked up while standing in front of the railing and she folded her hands in front of her.

"Miyako."

"What is with you right now?"

"Well," she said with a nod. "You can punish me later until my hip joint comes loose."

Miyako gave a questioning voice just before a light pain reached the back of her neck.

"…"

It was a light impact, but it hit just the right spot and her consciousness easily faded.

…Eh?

The surprise attack sent her collapsing forward and her mind went dark.

As she collapsed, she saw the one who had made the attack.

It was Apollo.

…You idiot.

That was her last thought before her consciousness cut out.

●

Moira 3rd looked up at someone from the top of the elevator.

It was a blond young man carrying a woman in white clothes under his arm.

"Are you sure, Lord Apollo? Miyako will probably cry."

"I'm sure. I'm glad I made it before she did anything rash. Can you lower the elevator?"

Moira 3rd hesitated for a moment, but she finally nodded and lowered it.

As the wind blew up from below, she asked Apollo a question.

"What are you going to do, Lord Apollo?"

"Find the answer I need to become a king and to settle everything surrounding 3rd-Gear."

"But Typhon…"

"The first and second options we have long spoken of are gone. That leaves the third path that I will now choose. It's good that Moira 2nd was repaired. We all have something we must do now."

He looked up into the sky.

The moon was out, but it was very low.

"Today is perfect. I will be able to remain myself for a long time."

He then faced Moira 3rd and shrugged.

"Keep this a secret from the others. I want to surprise them."

"A book from this world said a kingdom ruled by someone who loves theatrics will quickly fall to ruin."

"That's probably true."

His laughter spilled out into the night.

The elevator lowered and reached the side of the fully-open hangar door. As it continued further down, the light of the hangar came into view and the ends of Apollo's eyebrows rose as he watched that light.

"Now, it's time we went and finished this, Artemis."

●

At 10:30 PM, five trucks suddenly appeared at a three-way

junction in southeast Kurashiki.

The streetlights illuminated the trucks' blue text on a white background saying "Surprise Attack Delivery – Hair Clipper Service" and a drawing of a shouting middle-aged man with closely-cut hair.

The front two trucks moved first. They turned into a hospital parking lot to the right of the junction, turned around, and came to a stop.

The other three remained on the road and came to a sudden stop on the left curb.

A moment later, people wearing white and black armored uniforms left all five trucks.

The boy named Sayama looked around after exiting the third truck on the road.

The streetlights and the buildings were lit up.

Electricity was flowing.

"Everyone, so as not to affect the concept space, its expansion was stopped before it reached Kurashiki's transportation networks. Also, UCAT's Okayama and Izumo branches supplied every generator they had so we could have power within the concept space. This concept space is very nearly a deserted version of Low-Gear. Do not forget that!"

"Testament," replied the others.

"Find the enemy!" shouted Sayama before they had even finished the word.

The trailer of one of the trucks in the hospital parking lot rose and a tent-shaped pallet with a slanted roof made of bulletproof material came out.

The pallet was mechanically lowered to the ground and it was set up to the east. Its low roof had a viewing platform where Ooki peered out with binoculars. She folded her fingers next to the binoculars to count something.

"Found them! There are four big ones next to the road south of here! Um…two are on the other side of the Achi Shrine! And two are moving from the Achi Shrine to the Kurashiki Station area! That's more or less how it is!"

"Thank you for that explanation that killed all of the tension."

Sayama watched as the second tent meant as a medical area was

lowered into the hospital parking lot.

"The hospital trucks will continue down the road to the Achi Shrine area. They will function as barricades against the gods of war. They can fly, so the first truck should charge in and the second one should roll on its side after seeing what they do."

He looked to the left where the train track to the Mizushima area was separated from the road by a single building.

"Ooki-sensei, can you see the disguised train that is arriving after us?"

"Here it comes!" shouted Kazami from the roof of one of the truck trailers on the road.

The proof of her words came soon thereafter. A black form passed by on the track visible between the northern homes and paddy fields to their left.

The steel track creaked as the unmanned and remote controlled train carried a great weight at approximately sixty kilometers per hour. Ten canopied freight cars followed the blue car in front.

"Will it work as a decoy?" muttered Shinjou who looked north while sitting in the trailer of the third truck.

"They will have to deal with it somehow. If that creates an opening, it will be worth it. …Stand up the first and third gods of war!"

"Testament," replied a voice as the trailer Shinjou sat in began to tilt.

With the sound of motors, the large pallets on the first and third trucks stood up.

The pallet covers automatically unlocked and fell as if being lowered down. This revealed two white and black gods of war. They contained UCAT's emblem and one of the nearby UCAT members clenched his fist and spoke quietly as he watched it.

"Please stand up. You should even be able to fly with this concept."

Sayama mentally nodded toward the man's words.

…Will Low-Gear be able to fall into step with many different people and be better off for it?

The two gods of war took their first steps forward almost simultaneously.

Everyone cheered and they raised a hand to reach for the

weapons on the pallets behind them. They contained a sword and an anti-god of war SMG.

“Good,” muttered Sayama as he watched them take the weapons.

At the same time, a giant form stood up from the second truck on the street without a pallet rising up.

It was Susahito Custom.

The black god of war lowered one leg from the back of the truck and easily stood up.

Its movements were so natural that those who had watched the UCAT gods of war could not help but gulp.

Susahito Custom was based on a 3rd-Gear god of war and it far outdid the UCAT models that used their greatest technology. Sayama felt that was a gap they needed to fill. The others watched Susahito Custom check its bladed equipment and they all sighed yet kept perfectly serious expressions. They were seeing what they had to catch up to.

Sayama was satisfied with the strength in their gazes, so he spoke.

“Unit #3 will defend this spot! #1 and #2 will continue on! #1 will attack Kurashiki Station! #2 will follow, but do not forget to drop off the combatants on the way!”

He ran forward as he gave instructions and Shinjou ran alongside him. The second truck’s trailer shook the exhaust as it began to move. Once they caught up to it, Sayama and Shinjou grabbed the edge of the trailer and pulled themselves toward it.

The first truck lowered its raised trailer and moved forward, the second followed, and the third ejected the equipment aboard and began to lower its trailer.

As everyone began to move, someone appeared from a side road. It was a white-haired maid.

“Sf-kun?”

Sf lifted her skirt slightly, ran alongside the others, and bowed.

“Tes. It is fortunate I arrived in time. I have a warning before you run another one hundred meters,” she said while facing Sayama. “I have detected a powerful philosopher’s stone reading in the Kurashiki Station region. I believe it to be some form of concept weapon. Something is headed this way. The time until impact is-…”

An instant later, something struck the raised cargo pallet on the

trailer of Unit #3's truck.

●

Everyone lost their sense of hearing as they watched it.

The white cargo pallet for Unit #3's truck was still slightly raised when something smashed through the center.

In that instant, everything grew silent and even the movement felt delayed.

The hole in the center of the cargo pallet that had carried a god of war was frayed like melted plastic and it expanded on the opposite side.

However, it stopped at about two meters across. The shimmering of heat momentarily rose from around the hole.

"!"

The sound arrived, but it was not a roar or a crash.

It was a tremor.

It pierced through the entire body of everyone listening, shook the surrounding buildings, and shattered a few windows in an instant.

The vibration of the air formed a mist that was blown along by the wind.

Meanwhile, the trailer of Unit #3's truck was launched into the air by the impact.

The base of the trailer was destroyed and the giant metal panel that had lost its support almost seemed to bend backwards from the impact. It flew almost directly above the rest of the trailer.

The giant white metal panel made it over a dozen meters up into the air.

Below it, the truck that pulled the trailer had its back end pulled up by the base of the trailer.

The truck could not move as the metal panel fell down on it while oriented horizontally.

The impact sliced right through it.

A quick and clear noise left the truck sliced in two by the pallet that was stabbed into the ground like a wall.

The air was filled with the sound of wind and the other two trucks beginning to move.

Those sounds were joined by Sf's distancing voice.

“The second shot is coming. It is going elsewhere, though.”

It arrived that very instant.

“!?”

The sound came from the left as they continued onward.

They all looked to the left which was the north.

The train track was there and the disguised train was moving along it, but that train was easily pierced all the way through by some kind of power.

“…”

They could not see the bullet, but they could hear it.

First, they heard multiple quiet metallic noises.

They began at the very front of the disguised train and left the very back of the last freight car.

So far, it was all sound and nothing had actually happened.

Everyone held their breath and it arrived a moment later. “It” being destruction and much louder noises.

Trailing the first noises, everything on the train track split apart and flew into the air.

Everything on the train car chassis was thrown into the air and scattered like scraps of paper. With the sound of breaking metal, the remaining parts of the chassis were disorderly lifted into the air and bent.

Everyone heard an explosion that sounded like surging waves.

Next, the track itself exploded.

Like a reverse waterfall, dirt and the twin lines of metal were blasted upwards and the train tossed itself into empty space.

The eleven cars rolled, stabbed, and slid onto or into empty houses and paddy fields. Destruction and noise were scattered everywhere.

As everyone held their breath, one voice carried through the air.

That female voice belonged to Kazami.

“I know what this is! I just heard shouts from Kurashiki Station!”

She stood up and looked at the others.

“The only sound of the bullet being fired was the sonic boom. Since they could quickly fire on the road and the train track as two separate targets, it can’t be some giant cannon, but it still fires at ultra-high speeds. Also, the shouts I heard were female.”

She nodded.

“We’re up against automatons!”

●

At the south entrance of Kurashiki Station was a large roundabout for buses and taxis.

It was deserted in the moonlit concept space, but something other than people stood on the asphalt.

“Let us show you the hidden power of 3rd-Gear’s finest automatons.”

About half of the automatons below Moira 1st and excluding Moira 2nd and 3rd were there.

“Counting me, there are 37 of us. …Time for the third shot!”

Moira 1st looked from the roundabout to the road. A white object was visible about a kilometer down that road. One of UCAT’s truck trailers had raised its empty cargo pallet as a barricade.

…It is unfortunate we must do this to another machine, but you are in the way.

Their only choice was to destroy it without letting it feel pain.

“Okay! The distance is approximately 1200 meters. The angle is 8 hours 12 minutes to the southwest!”

The maids ran as if to continue her words. Their footsteps passed by and they formed two columns with Moira 1st at the end.

Each of the automatons faced one in the other column and held their hands up and down toward them.

With a large vertical gap between their hands, each pair formed a circle together.

Moira 1st spoke as she saw the series of circles formed from the maids’ arms.

“We are using the gravitational control that is standard with any 3rd-Gear automaton. Our individual powers may be weak, but if this many of us point that power in the same direction…”

They had formed a series of rings.

Moira 1st stood at the end where she counted a total of 18 rings and could see the white trailer through that straight line of rings.

The other maids looked to her and nodded, so she nodded back.

“Begin output!”

“Yes, sir!”

A distortion grew in the 18 rings formed by the maids. The

scenery on the other side looked warped as if viewing it through a lens.

That distortion came from the flow of high gravity and that gravity was oriented from Moira 1st and toward the road.

Moira 1st quietly spoke toward the white truck trailer that appeared warped through the lens of gravity.

“These 18 gravity acceleration lenses will turn any object into incredibly destructive acceleration.”

She took a breath.

“We call this the 18-Layer Maid Gravity Acceleration Gun. What can you do against this, UCAT?”

Moira 1st pulled two plates from her maid uniform and held them up with a smile.

“Today’s bullets are 3rd-Gear’s heat- and explosion-resistant plates that can withstand one hundred gods of war stepping on them without breaking. Quite affordable weapons if you ask me.”

She placed the plates together like a shellfish and held them together with gravitational pressure. She then used her gravitational control to levitate the resultant disk between her hands and held them next to her waist.

“Get ready! And a question, everyone. What is the primary job of a maid?”

“Yes, sir! Attending to the guests with a smile!”

Seeing them all form artificial smiles and face the road, Moira 1st’s eyes narrowed in a smile.

“Well done.”

She then fired the disk with her maximum power.

The disk’s journey began with enough force to produce an explosion of steam behind her.

“Fire!”

The disk sliced through the wind as it passed through the rings formed by the maids’ arms and the warped space therein.

“!”

From there, it was repeatedly accelerated by the frictionless gravity. They did not fire it at the absolute greatest speed possible because they held back just enough to not be swallowed up by the sonic boom themselves.

However…

“There is nothing that cannot be pierced by this gravity acceleration railgun formed by 36 smiling maids!”

In an instant, strength gathered in the maids’ hands. The air grew even more distorted and they suppressed the recoil. The 18 gravity rings continued to accelerate the disk and it finally reached the last ring.

"…"

It was fired and it flew.

The wind whipped up by the disk felt like an explosive blast and the disk itself could no longer be seen.

An instant later, Moira 1st and the others saw the raised cargo pallet blow apart.

Despite the distance, they vividly saw the white metal tear apart, fly through the air, and destroy the nearby buildings.

The clear noise was audible even at that distance.

The maids gave cries of joy, but Moira 1st frowned as she watched the pieces of the trailer scatter through the air.

…I'm sorry. It would be faint, but you must have been alive while in this concept space.

Without opening her joint memory, she decided to gather it later and recreate it.

But, she thought as her frown grew. *This is odd.*

Once she realized why, she let out a shout with her eyebrows thoroughly gathered together.

"Prepare the next shot!"

Taken aback, the others stopped moving and turned toward her, so Moira 1st opened their joint memory and sent high-speed words to inform them of the situation.

…This is dangerous.

After all…

"Unmanned target," said a voice in midair.

She looked up and saw a large blue automaton in the sky with the moon.

"Master Cottus, that trailer really was empty?"

"Decoy confirmed."

And…

"Enemy approach confirmed!"

That shout was followed by a sound from the south of the city.

It was a war cry as well as…

"Explosions and metallic noises."

Moira 1st saw people in white armored uniforms much closer than the truck.

They made their way forward through gaps in the explosions.

Moira 1st determined they had split into two groups while using

the truck as a decoy. One group had approached them on the north of the city while the other had cut down a central road to advance toward the base to the southeast.

The enemy had made the correct decision and that fact set Cottus in motion.

“Acting as vanguard.”

He began toward the enemies spread out on the road, but Moira 1st shouted out.

“Master Cottus! You take care of the enemies advancing to the southwest! We will defend here!”

Cottus turned back toward her and nodded.

“Understood.”

He expanded the wings on his back and flew to the south as if jumping.

Moira 1st nodded toward his rear vision. All hesitation had vanished from her face and her eyebrows were raised.

…I am being unreasonably angry, but some things are unforgivable.

They had used a metal truck trailer as a decoy.

“If you do not win, that trailer’s destruction will have been in vain.”

She raised both her hands and two white disks floated above her head. They were plates, but she did not wait for them to fall back down. With a snap of the wrist, she prepared another plate in each hand.

She caught the two falling plates on the two plates in her hands.

She now held a bullet in each hand and she slowly swung them down and backwards.

She leaned forward to bring the plate pairs even further behind her. She swung them up like wings and let out a shout as she bent her body.

“Prepare two cannons!”

The maids wordlessly did so. They lifted their skirts slightly and flipped them around as they took a step and rotated their own bodies. They now formed two rows of nine pairs each.

The cannons were shorter, but there were two of them.

“The strength drops in half, but rapid fire is more important now.”

Moira 1st used an underhand toss to throw forward the plates in

her right hand.

The right cannon whipped up the wind and fired. In that instant, she threw the left one while twisting and then spinning her body to the right.

Her hair danced, her apron flipped around, and her blouse's sleeves flew.

Over a hundred white plates flew out from within those places and into the air.

She began forming bullets from those midair plates and throwing them into the cannons.

As if dancing, she grabbed plates, served them forward, and spoke with a smile.

"Come visit us. Come visit us, our guests. This is the place in which we serve using the discipline of steel. A white apron over black clothes is our uniform, receiving and seeing off a guest with a smile even when in pain is our external appearance, and ensuring our guests' satisfaction is our internal desire."

Her smile deepened, her body rotated, and she formed countless bullets as if dancing.

"No refusal or restraint is necessary when receiving our services. Simply demand, and demand, and demand some more. Leave your heart in our service, leave your body in our comfort, and leave your life in our control."

She threw.

"We will take care of everything."

And she fired.

The maids sending the bullets through the acceleration lenses would spin around in turn as the bullets reached them. As they rotated around, they eliminated the old acceleration lens and gathered strength in their arms once more.

"Contact! Continue serving!"

The way the pairs brought their hands together after spinning looked like a dance.

Once they were done, Moira 1st sent a new bullet with her right hand and she had already prepared a new plate in her left hand.

They fired again and again and they did not stop.

Chapter 35

“Spirit of Gathering”

Gather together
To meet tonight
To do what you must do

●

Hiba ran down the twisting and turning two-lane road.

He did not have a human body. He was the eight meter god of war named Susahito Custom.

Also, he was not on the road to Kurashiki Station. About halfway there, he had turned onto the narrow road heading east to the Achi Shrine area.

The road was narrow, telephone poles were situated right on the edge of the road, and the power lines were hung low.

Those power lines were three or four meters off the ground and a great number of them were strung at multiple heights, so equipping himself with wire cutters would not be enough.

Even so, he continued on. He lowered down as if falling to the ground and slipped beneath them at high speed.

He had a habit of taking a low stance when charging in, and it helped Susahito Custom advance even here in the city.

The truck following him kept its actuators at their weakest to lower its height as much as possible.

His rear vision showed Kazami, Sayama, and Shinjou riding the roof of the truck trailer.

They had turned down this road on Sayama's instructions.

The attack unit built around Izumo was on its way to Kurashiki Station. They had all regrouped in the time bought by the decoy truck trailer and both groups were taking a different route to the Achi Shrine.

This road was at the midpoint between Kurashiki Station and the road traveling from south Kurashiki to the Achi Shrine.

On the simple diagram used during the strategy meeting, the road formed a horizontal line cutting off the top half of the equilateral triangle.

Following the road would take them to the halfway point on the road from Kurashiki Station to the Achi Shrine. According to Shinjou and Sayama's preliminary investigation, that halfway point was a shopping district and Kurashiki's shopping district was covered by a roof and therefore a poor match for god of war combat. If they were to fire a sniper rifle, the center of the road there would be best.

…But how many enemies will catch up to us before then?

They had confirmed the existence of eight gods of war.

Hiba might have to fight that many enemies in complete urban warfare. On top of that, their objective was not defeating the enemies. They had to stop the enemy leader and take Typhon.

…How will this turn out?

He had never before fought in this sort of situation.

At that point, he heard a voice behind him.

“Hiba boy.”

It came from Sayama who sat on the truck trailer roof. As his bangs blew in the wind, he brushed them up with the gauntlet named Georgius.

“Take it easy so you can bring out your true ability. Getting lost in thought is meaningless if it prevents you from fighting at your best.”

“You’re right.”

“Okay, you two, Here they come!” shouted Kazami.

Hiba saw two green gods of war flying in from the right which was the south. They flew using both gravitational control and thrusters, but maintained a low trajectory as if leaping.

Seeing their movements, Hiba predicted they planned to crush the massive truck trailer.

“Here I go!”

●

Hiba moved within the few meters of space between power lines.

He stopped running and instead leaped.

Susahito Custom was not equipped with very powerful gravitational control. When moving, it was easier to use the two wings on the back.

He stood up and kicked off the ground to propel his body into the sky.

Once his line of sight grew higher than the surrounding roofs, he spread the wings on his back.

He did not want to turn his back toward the enemies in the sky, so he rotated into a face up position as if performing a Fosbury Flop.

Then he flapped his wings.

“!”

The acceleration was enough to disturb the circulatory organs within the god of war.

This was a light craft. Its wing output could not match Susamikado's, but it was light enough to outdo Susamikado's acceleration.

His vision rose in an instant and he launched above the roofs and into the sky.

Based on the height of the nighttime scenery, he estimated his own altitude at thirty meters.

The enemy descended from above at close range.

Of the two green gods of war, the left one aimed a rifle at him.

It fired repeatedly from within arm's reach.

However…

"Don't be so naïve."

He had already stopped his wings.

The rapid stall and air resistance struck his body and the braking lowered his altitude.

He dropped by a meter and bullets passed through that meter.

"…!"

The left god of war quickly moved to re-aim by lowering the arm holding the rifle, but the recoil would not let it move the arm joints so easily.

Hiba looked down as he slowly fell.

A two-story house was there. It was an old house with a tile roof. It was lit, but it was empty.

"Excuse me a moment."

He placed his metal feet on the roof. Without scratching a single tile, he used the slight recoil as a starting point and flew once more. He charged toward the god of war that was adjusting its grip on the rifle.

His opponent abandoned the rifle and defensively thrust its armored elbows forward.

…Still too naïve.

Hiba twisted his body in midair.

He stretched out his body and flapped a single wing to perform a midair cartwheel.

He used the motion to throw a kick from below.

His steel heel smashed through the elbow defense and reached the god of war's stomach.

A metallic sound of impact rang out and the god of war was

knocked through the air.

The impact sent its rifle flying through the sky, but Hiba was no longer looking at that opponent.

“Next!”

He used the recoil of the kick to leap downwards as the other god of war attempted to fall on top of the truck trailer.

Its plan was to crush the trailer with its entire body, so it accelerated with its limbs spread out. Light shot from the thrusters on its back and it fell straight down.

Hiba saw everyone looking up at him from the top of the trailer. Kazami and Shinjou frantically stood up and aimed their weapons upwards.

However, Hiba saw something else as well.

Next to Shinjou, Sayama remained seated and looked up toward the bottom of her armored uniform.

…He’s secretly admiring her butt!

I need to learn from him, thought Hiba as he moved his wings to accelerate.

He instantly caught up to the falling god of war and he struck it with a downwards roundhouse kick.

With a piercing sound, the path of the god of war’s descent veered away from the truck and it crashed into the wall of a brown apartment building.

He heard a sound resembling stone being struck and a giant hole in the shape of a body with spread limbs appeared in the apartment building.

“Now to finish it.”

He reached a hand into the air and something fell into it.

It was the rifle the previous god of war had lost.

He grabbed it with his left hand and used his upper vision to check on the god of war he had knocked upwards.

He fired the first shot straight up.

The metal bullet struck its target and the recoil caused the rifle to vibrate downwards. Hiba used that recoil to rotate the rifle down and aim toward the hole in the apartment building.

“And the second one!”

He fired until it ran out of ammunition and an explosion occurred near the building’s first floor.

The god of war had been destroyed and the eight-story apartment building on top of it collapsed because its base was gone. The fire of the god of war that exploded in the air behind Hiba lit up the building's destruction.

The rumbling continued for a while and Hiba gave a bitter smile within the machine when the truck gave a long honk of the horn in thanks as it passed by.

…Oh, dear. This may be a concept space, but I need to try to cause less damage next time.

He moved his wings and caught up to the truck in an instant. Several bullets whipped up the wind and flew toward him from far to the south, but he could easily evade them at that distance.

He twisted around in midair and led the truck.

"Rematch desired!"

Suddenly, a low voice and a giant blue form appeared in the northern sky.

It was Cottus.

●

The appearance of the blue god of war put Hiba on guard.

But he was too slow. Cottus already stood in the air right in front of Hiba and he spread four cannons around him using his gravitational control. Not only that, but all four cannons already had light visible in the barrels.

Hiba did not have time to draw the two swords stored at his waist.

"…!"

Just as he tried to evade, something unexpected happened.

Cottus was suddenly blasted upwards.

…What!?

It had been a cannon blast. A beam of light from a super god of war class weapon had blasted away the armor on Cottus's left waist and knocked his giant form diagonally up into the sky.

Still surprised, Hiba checked below with his lower sight devices. He first saw Shinjou holding a giant cannon on top of the truck trailer, but there was no light or residual heat coming from it. Next, he saw…

"Okay, okay, okay. Don't fight all on your own. Did you forget that

we're here in case that kind of thing happens?"

Kazami quickly flew up with wings of light.

She held a white spear in both hands and she turned toward Cottus who stood in front of Hiba.

"How did you like that blast?"

As she lightly rotated the spear that was now a cannon, Cottus frantically adjusted his posture and faced her in midair.

"…"

He responded with silence, but Kazami spoke.

"You don't look satisfied. It may not look it, but my weapon contains 10th-Gear's Concept Core. I can fire with even more power, so I was actually holding back."

She then pointed back toward Hiba.

"In our student council, Hiba's ranked beneath me. In fact, he's the lowest ranked of everyone. Can you really enjoy getting into a serious fight with someone like that? He's the kind that will rush off to buy you a coffee if you give him some money."

"I-I haven't done that yet."

But Cottus ignored Hiba's protest and tilted his head. He scratched his head armor with the cannon that acted as a right arm and he faced Kazami.

"Truth?"

Instead of answering, Kazami silently thrust the spear forward

"It's true," said the green LCD on the long spear's console.

"She's got the Concept Core working against me!?"

"Shut up. Try to let your upperclassman look good at least a little bit. And you need to go on ahead. That's your role, remember? Don't get worked up over some weird issue."

"…"

"Where's your answer!?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"Good," muttered Kazami.

She spread her wings of light wide, turned her back on him once more, and faced her opponent.

"A mass of cannons floating in the sky and a winged girl with a spear. Sounds like a decent fight for air superiority, doesn't it?"

She then shouted toward Cottus.

"Come with me!"

●

Shinjou lowered Ex-St from her shoulder and sighed.

Susahito Custom had just removed its sniper rifle from the cargo pallet behind her and flown forward while Kazami had just flown north while exchanging fire with Cottus.

The rest of them only had to run east to support Hiba.

The wind washed over her and she brushed a hand through her long, black hair. Her hair felt heavy as it waved in the wind, but it also felt nice. She looked around and noticed sounds of gun and cannon fire coming from different areas of the lit city. The sound of something exploding to the north likely came from the automatons' rapid fire.

She saw occasional light to the south. She guessed that was the UCAT members forming a barricade to stop the gods of war approaching the main UCAT unit at the hospital. Two of the gods of war had been sent there, so their normal large weapons were focused there.

…That should be enough if it's focused on defense. Right?

She looked down to seek agreement from Sayama, but she found him lying on his back. To make matters worse, he had his head placed between her legs.

"Oh, what is it, Shinjou-kun? I was lost in some intense thought."

Shinjou gave an intense stomp on him and he quickly sat up.

"What on earth are you doing? You really can do some outrageous things."

"You're the one doing that! What could you possibly have been thinking about with your head between my legs!?"

"The arrangement of enemies, of course. Could there be any doubt?"

"That answer makes me question why you were looking up at me from below."

"Lying down gave me a view of some outstanding curves. And the act of admiring the art of nature needs no explanation."

She considered hitting him with Ex-St, but she knew he could not recover from that. She tried to remind herself that he was technically complimenting her.

"Y'know…"

She took a step back and faced him in order to warn him.

As she looked toward him, she naturally got a view of the path ahead of the truck.

There, she saw several figures in an upcoming narrow intersection.

…Those are automatons.

Several dozen women in maid uniforms were lined up in the center of the intersection.

It was the enemy.

“Sayama-kun! The front! The front!”

He nodded, silently grabbed her waist with both hands, and looked across her from navel to thighs.

“I see nothing out of the ordinary on your front side.”

After she kneed him, he fell back and sat up again.

“Wh-what was that for, Shinjou-kun!?”

“I’m telling you to look to the front, Sayama-kun! Hurry!”

He once more grabbed her waist with a serious expression. Thinking he was repeating the joke, she prepared to use the other knee.

“Eh?”

But the truck suddenly braked. With one leg raised, she lost her balance and fell as if thrown forward.

She pushed Sayama down with her upper leg and a dull noise came from between her and the roof.

She bounced a bit off of his face, body, and the roof.

“Ow…”

She grimaced at the pain in her knee, but she quickly raised her butt to get up.

She then found Sayama beneath her. She frantically pulled back and took a shallow sitting position on his stomach.

However, she found him staring expressionlessly up into the sky and not moving. She then recalled that he had hit the back of his head on the roof.

“A-are you okay, Sayama-kun!? The hit to your head didn’t knock you normal, did it?”

In response, Sayama raised both hands a little and made several stroking motions along strange curves in empty air.

“Was it like this? Or was it this? If I could make a mold, a

wonderful future awaits me.”

“Hm. From the looks of it, you’re unfortunately fine. Thank goodness.”

When she grabbed his tie and strangled him, she heard a female voice from up ahead.

“You’re fighting yourselves? That makes this easier for us.”

Shinjou looked up in realization and found a maid in glasses looking up at them from approximately fifteen meters in front of the truck. The truck had already stopped to face the enemy.

Beneath her, Sayama bent his head back to see the maid and he spoke to her.

“Who are you? In fact, do you even have a name?”

That question caused her to narrow her eyes in a smile.

…What a natural expression.

The maid nodded as if to answer that thought of Shinjou’s and to confirm something.

“My name is Violet. All the others here have also chosen the names of flowers.”

“I see. So this battlefield is colored by a myriad of flowers. First the sun and moon god and now this. It seems 3rd-Gear is a very elegant world.”

“Thank you very much. We will now use our short-term training from Master Aigaion to assist our guests.”

“Where is this Aigaion?”

“He called for Lady Gyes and moved to the base. He told us to take care of things here in the meantime.”

Violet smiled as she spoke and the maids behind her took a step forward.

“This visit to the city of Kurashiki is our first time in the outside world, but we have heard quite a bit from Lady Gyes and Master Aigaion. The owner of the greengrocer in the train station shopping district can be careless when it comes to calculating money, but he somehow never thinks the price is higher than it actually is. The female owner of the clock shop on the main western road for some reason does not fix her late husband’s stopped watch. The chairman of the committee for the care of the private homes in the Bikan district is oddly hesitant to bring the central meetings to his own home.”

Her smile grew.

“Let us work hard in the city they inhabit. I have determined working hard is a good thing. Without it, taking a break would have no meaning. …And we sing in order to work hard.”

She indicated the items they all held.

“Knives for preparing large ingredients, pot lids for catching flying oil, frying pans, and the like.”

Violet slightly sharpened the bend in her eyes.

“We are not human, but we live alongside them, sing songs, and revere the sun and the moon. …I am a poor cook, but the others are quite skilled.”

She nodded and spoke the words that indicated the battle’s beginning.

“Please come in.”

●

The moon began to rise in the night sky.

The air of the summer night made the moon waver when viewed from the mountains in western Tokyo.

However, this was not as far west as Okutama where the cities began to disappear. These were the mountains of Hachioji which had a highway and a large shopping district that lit the sky at night.

In a mountain of the Takao region, an abandoned factory inside a concept space was lit up.

The large door on the front of the factory was opened and the industrial elevator leading underground was rising to the surface. The sounds of the heavy elevator rising throbbed at set intervals and the object it carried soon came into view.

The orange lights illuminated a giant machine.

The steel-colored object resembled a dragon, an airplane, and a ship.

The unpainted mechanical dragon was at least thirty meters long.

Silhouettes of workers could be seen moving around in the backlight. They checked on the elevator’s movement and location.

The elderly supervisor raised his hands from where he watched them in the center of the entrance.

“Stop!”

With that one word, the elevator made a metallic noise and came

to a halt.

“Let him out, men! That dragon is flying tonight!”

“Yes, sir!”

Sand shot up from the factory entrance and to the clearing in front of it. It formed two straight lines. Buried rails appeared from underneath the sand and they led to a fifty meter landing zone made from concrete.

The elevator moved slowly along the rails with the giant steel dragon onboard.

The old supervisor whistled and guided the elevator forward with both hands.

A girl and a shadowless dog arrived from the side of the building.

The girl looked to the head of the dragon on the elevator platform.

Another girl sat on the dragon’s head. She had her long hair swept to one side and back, she wore a sand yellow combat coat, and she carried a Cowling Sword on her back. The long Cowling Sword resembled a Japanese sword.

The girl on the ground prepared to call out to the girl on the dragon, but the elevator arrived at the landing zone at that very moment.

The dragon took simultaneous movements.

It shook, metallic creaking and scraping noises came from its entire body, and it rose up.

The exclusively metallic din filled the air like a torrential downpour, but another sound surpassed even that.

“Outstanding!”

The dragon spoke in a tone of admiration. He raised his short legs and stretched his tail backwards so that the elevator could slip beneath him and to return to its original position.

Amid the different mechanical noises, the girl on top of the dragon smiled and spoke.

“It’s too bad, Alex. You aren’t going to introduce yourself, right?”

“Of course, Tatsumi. I have a modest personality and no one would believe I am an ally of justice with this lack of paint. I plan to take the attitude of a masked hero for this outing!”

“Yes, yes.” Tatsumi shrugged and looked at the watch on her left wrist. “We should probably get going, Alex.”

“Isn’t it a little early?”

“You still need to break in this new body, don’t you? The drivers and fittings between parts still aren’t perfect and I would rather you didn’t burn out or lose a part by going all out too quickly.”

“But an ally of justice does not follow the speed limit.”

“But you’re an unpainted and masked hero, remember? That way no one knows you’re an ally of justice.”

“Oh, right.” Alex nodded and turned to the supervisor. “I seem to have been mistaken about the paint job. Supervisor, I must thank you for your consideration. Forgive me. There is still a lot I do not understand.”

“I’ll agree there’s a lot you don’t understand.”

The corner of the supervisor’s mouth twisted upwards and he looked at his watch. After checking the time, he nodded and looked to the girl with a dog.

“Shino-san, do you have something to say?”

“Yes.” Shino tilted her head to look up at Alex’s head from below. “You look cool, Alex.”

“Of course I do. Even when unpainted, a girl who understands the spirit of justice can see the pure heart of justice burning within me.”

“No, I don’t think I really get that spirit of justice stuff…”

“Being too modest is not a virtue, Shino. Revealing your true feelings is what matters!”

“While revealing that can hold great significance, always revealing it is a significantly bad idea.”

“Yes, you are right, Tatsumi,” said Alex. “I only express a tenth of my true feelings.”

Shino fell to her knees and hung her head and the dog tilted its head as it watched her.

Seeing that, the mechanical dragon lowered down a little.

“Now, then.”

In the instant he spoke, a great amount of wind was knocked into the sky.

“!!”

Shino frantically held down her skirt and hair, but there was no longer anything on the ground.

“Wow,” she said as she looked up.

A single color had already appeared in the night sky.

A white contrail extended westward from the heavens directly above.

Chapter 36

“Hope for the Next Generation”

I once had a certain thought
I am now not so sure
And if I think on it further...

●

The light and noise of the battle in the city reached the white building that acted as 3rd-Gear's base.

The concept space had been formed at around 9:00 PM. Kurashiki was a tourist city, but the lights of its train station, roads, and amusement park had gone out. The stores were closed and the homes were quietly illuminated.

The lights of the homes and the streetlights revealed the roads and empty lots with pale darkness.

Currently, a lot of fire, light, and sound were appearing in that paleness.

Next to the large hangar door, the fighting in the city was visible from the southeast.

Three people were watching it where they stood before the elevator to the side of the lit hangar.

One was Gyes in her red suit and she spoke to the man before her.

"Hajji, keep it quick. The time to settle this has come."

She looked at Hajji in his white summer coat and then turned to the right. A girl with a sword at her waist stood next to him. She had sharp facial features and had her long black hair tied back.

"Her name is Mikoku. Do you like her? She's one of my precious children. What do you think? Hm?"

"Did you come all this way just to introduce her?"

Despite the question, the girl named Mikoku did not look at Gyes. She instead looked at the small red pendant in her hand. Gyes recognized it as the cloisonné the area was known for.

Hajji gave a bitter smile when he noticed.

"You shouldn't take out souvenirs like that, Mikoku. I'm sure Shino will like it. Am I wrong? Hm?"

"You have time to check on your decorations before our battle? How carefree."

Gyes mentally constructed a method of driving Hajji away.

The battle in the city was enough of an issue, but something else required her attention too.

…Lord Apollo and Lady Miyako are gone.

Before the battle, she had investigated the automatons' base

abilities and acquired abilities and divided them between a firing team and a hand-to-hand combat team accordingly. Afterwards, she had planned to wake Apollo and Miyako and urge them to either surrender or flee.

Ultimately, she had been unable to think up a good method of saving Apollo.

The best option she could come up with was to have them surrender and have Typhon's cockpit removed. That would at least prevent Typhon's body from struggling.

With that, she had planned to leave the final decision to Apollo.

She had gone to wake them on the upper floors and make that suggestion, but Miyako's room had been empty. She had only noticed the elevator was lowered after searching the living floors in their entirety. They had apparently just missed each other while she was climbing the internal stairs from the hangar.

In that case, they would have been in the hangar, but once she quickly called the elevator up and rode it down, she had found these two people in front.

"At any rate, you need to leave. I cannot let you see what is inside here."

"Really? Are you sure, Gyes? Don't you think it's about time to send Typhon out? Hm? Based on the sounds, I think your sixth god of war was just destroyed. Am I wrong? Hm?"

He was right.

The god of war piloted by the descendant of Hiba was destroying Moira 2nd's gods of war.

Their opponent's machine was based on the wreckage of a normal god of war retrieved sixty years before. Their machines should have been more powerful due to the improvements they had since made, but…

"Most likely, the enemy's craft is more balanced. And its pilot is better. He uses the feedback missing from remote control to take actions only he can." She nodded. "Moira 2nd is putting up a good fight. She is not even a combat automaton, but she is piloting multiple craft at once while opposing the god of war that fought 3rd-Gear in the past."

"I see. So that's a clear weakness in remote control, is it? Yeah, we'll have to remember that."

"Why would you need to remember it?"

"It's simple. It's so very simple, Gyes. As promised, we will be taking Typhon's wreckage if UCAT takes the Concept Core. Once we do that, we'll probably rig it for remote control."

Gyes's eyebrows shot up a bit as she thought about what Hajji had just said.

"You have determined that we will lose?"

"We are here because there is a possibility you will, Gyes. We want to make sure this opportunity doesn't escape us. Do you understand what an opportunity is, Gyes?"

Gyes sighed as he spread his arms and indicated the city with his chin.

He then shrugged.

"Now, let's get to the real issue. What if I asked you to let Apollo escape?"

"What? Lord Apollo does not need-…"

"You've sent out all your forces, but Typhon remains here. Also, Cottus pulled UCAT's flight-capable fighter to the north. There's still the threat of a sniper, but the sky is at least clear. You can easily have him escape now, can't you? Hm?"

Gyes said nothing.

"We want to do whatever we can for 3rd-Gear. I'm being honest. This is a good deal for both of us. After all, if we save 3rd-Gear's king, you automatons will be thankful. Right? That's right, isn't it?"

"Enough nonsensical delusions. We are a Gear that dislikes running. Back during the war, we always chose to invade." She chose her words carefully. "Besides, most any god of war can fly. Is there anything you could do to help?"

"Yes. We could take the villain's role."

When Gyes frowned, Hajji hid his mouth yet his smile was visible in his eyes.

"There is a woman of 2nd-Gear descent in this building, isn't there? We will take her to buy you the time you need. We will tell UCAT to give us some time if they care about her life."

It took several seconds for Hajji to finish speaking.

The entire time, he watched her with his smile hidden behind his hand and she made up her mind while looking at that smile.

"This goes beyond being incompatible." She sharply narrowed her

eyes. “UCAT is better than you.”

“Now that’s a terrible insult.”

“It would be the greatest of insults for us to continue this relationship with you any longer. You claim to want Typhon, but it would be impossible to take it away with you while UCAT is here.”

“If we could take it away regardless, would you give it to us right now? Hm?”

Hajji narrowed his eyes too, but it was not Gyes who answered him.

“You sound pretty hostile to me,” said a male voice behind Hajji.

It was Aigaion. He leaped over the underbrush to leave the forest down below. He landed about three meters behind Hajji and the girl named Mikoku. The two of them would need to turn around and take a step to reach him, but Aigaion could use gravity techniques.

“I will shut down your life functions.”

The scenery grew distorted above his raised right hand. He had created an ultra-heavy bullet from an isolated mass of gravity.

If fired and released, it would badly dent even an opponent with god of war class defenses. With a human target, it would constrict their entire body inwards along with the surrounding scenery, so they would die instantly.

With his right hand raised, he faced his targets before turning to Gyes and speaking via their shared memory.

…You haven’t lost sight of what you must do, have you?

His gaze turned to the city.

…If we take any more of their help, we will be betraying Lady Miyako.

“Hajji was it?” asked Aigaion. “I have a question. Is UCAT your enemy?”

“Hm, how should I put it? To be blunt, UCAT is our *only* enemy.”

“I see,” said Aigaion.

…They are an enemy of Lady Miyako’s Gear.

And…

…That means they are our enemy.

Gyes carved his words into her memory and finally nodded.

“I will leave it to you. Aigaion, I will be leaving.”

With that, she turned her back.

She had something to do: find Apollo and Miyako.

She faced the light of the hangar and ran inside.

As she cut through the wind, she heard Hajji's voice behind her.

"It's too bad, Gyes. It really is. Now I can't tell you our true intentions. But I am hoping for your victory. I really am. And I am also hoping to take Typhon."

She heard a sudden noise behind her.

It sounded like a large amount of dirt bursting upwards.

It was the sound of Aigaion releasing the gravity bullet.

It was also the sound of the enemy being crushed along with the surrounding landscape.

The attack was impossible to avoid.

Without turning around, Gyes ran into the hangar.

●

In the darkness, a large hole had appeared near the base of the white building.

Aigaion's mass of gravity had created it.

He stood still in the night air while a compressed clump of dirt and grass crumbled within a five meter half circle in the ground.

The hole also contained something other than the terrain: human limbs.

Torn clothing and a broken sword could be glimpsed among the dirt and their owner's body lay broken below the scattered clothing.

However…

"Only one."

Aigaion turned to the right and saw a man standing at the white building's wall on the other side of the hole.

It was Hajji. His limbs were spread out as if he had been plastered to the wall.

"That was quite a wonderful attack. I really would like to bring you to our side. How about it? Hm?"

"No, thank you."

But Aigaion looked into the hole along with the pile of fallen dirt and the human body within.

"So she pushed her leader out of the way and died herself? Did you call her your precious child because she could ensure your own life, Hajji?"

"No, I call her that because she is an important part of correcting

this mistaken world.”

“What?”

As he gave that question, Aigaion gathered gravity in his left hand. Hajji was approximately five meters away, so he was well within range and he did not have anyone to cover for him this time.

…I will not miss this time.

He determined Hajji’s words were meant to buy time until his death.

“In that case…”

He gathered strength in his left hand in order to destroy the balance of the gravity and fire it.

However, he suddenly noticed something odd.

Below his left arm, something was sticking out from his left side.

It was a thin and narrow panel that reflected the weak lighting.

It was a blade.

“…!”

He looked to his left. A girl had stabbed a broken sword into his side while using the blind spot created by his raised arm. She held the sword in both hands in the stance for a jab.

For an instant, he could not determine who this was. His mind tried to say it was Mikoku.

“There are two of her!?”

But that was not it. The human remains were gone from the hole that was to his left now that he had turned toward Hajji. He also noticed what Mikoku was wearing.

“I went all the way to Shinjuku to buy this, but you’ve turned it into an indecent short-sleeved, midriff-baring outfit.”

She twisted the blade she held bare-handed. That twisted and loosened his artificial muscles and allowed her to pull out the broken sword.

She made a second attack, but he took action this time.

He had shut off his sense of pain from the moment he prepared for battle and she likely knew that, so he released the limiters on his artificial muscles and raised his speed. This was enough speed to prevent her from reacting even if she had predicted it.

He moved.

“!”

He turned around at high speed.

He moved the gravity gathered in his left arm to the front of his left fist and threw a backhand strike toward Mikoku.

He looked at her.

From his perspective, her heart was located to the right slightly below the breasts that the remnants of her shirt just barely covered.

She raised her eyebrows at the speed of his fist and she tried to use both legs to leap backwards. She planned to escape no matter what while ignoring the hole behind her.

She was fast, but he caught her.

His fist would normally have felt flesh, but he had shut down even that sense of pain.

His backhand fist gouged into the center of her chest.

The gravity tore into her. The mass of gravity had already begun to break down, so he could not estimate how much damage it would do.

The area inside her chest that contained her heart was crushed.

"————!"

She bent forward. The flow of high blood pressure created in the instant her heart was crushed caused her entire body to violently shake and then her lower chest caved in.

"…"

She collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut, but Aigaion had already created a new mass of gravity in his right hand.

"Don't run, Hajji. This one is for you."

He raised his right hand and faced Hajji, but he then noticed Hajji had a hand over his mouth and a smile in his eyes.

Automaton minds could not feel premonitions, but they could make predictions.

He went over what Hajji had said in the conversation and the response patterns of normal humans from the data he had accumulated working at the greengrocer.

…This is not a normal reaction!

Then what about the situation was not normal?

The answer was to the left of his feet. No, it had already risen to his left thigh.

Mikoku was standing up.

"How is this possible!?"

She was human. Her reaction to having her heart crushed and everything else had been human. He could compare this to all the accumulated data from 3rd-Gear's human experimentation. And yet Mikoku was standing up and her rising motion was gradually picking up speed.

"!"

He fired the mass of gravity in his right hand toward Mikoku even though he would be caught in the blast.

●

Mikoku stood up as she faced Aigaion.

He was nearly two heads taller than her and he was swinging his right hand toward her.

She realized it would hit and a hit would eat up more time.

…And that will put Hajji in danger.

She did not really know how skilled he was. Since he was the former commander of 9th-Gear's military, he was likely powerful, but he had never taken part in training even once.

Even so, she trusted his strength.

…But…

She was his bodyguard.

…Even if he can win here with ease, I must protect him.

She raised her head. She could not gather much strength in her legs and her heart was still not back to normal. Blood was not being sent to her limbs properly and the strength she wanted came with an unwanted trembling.

She could not move properly.

…What do I do?

Aigaion's right arm was already moving toward her left side.

She sensed she could not evade it, but she frowned and thought.

…This may be hopeless, but…

She continued her thought.

…I will gain the proper experience!

"————!"

As she took in a breath, she recalled Tatsumi's training just before coming here. Tatsumi always turned aside Mikoku's movements with the smallest movement possible and then threw her own attack.

How did she manage that? Mikoku could not move in the same way.

…But I must have my own way of moving.

She groaned and thought about her own body. First, her left hand was out of the question because she still could not gather strength in it, but her right hand was strong enough to somewhat grab something. Her left leg was of no use, but her right had some strength.

She decided to start with her right leg.

“——————”

She noticed Aigaion release the mass of gravity, but it was on top of his palm. The back of his hand was a safe zone.

For that reason, she did not use her right leg. She instead started on her unusable left leg.

She charged below his right arm and her left leg naturally collapsed underneath her.

However, that was fine. Her body swayed to the left as if falling and not even she could predict the movement.

…I can escape.

Her falling body slipped just beneath his right hand and she took her next step with the usable right leg.

She thrust her right heel forward and stepped a bit left of her center to stop her leftward fall. Once she stopped it, she sent her body forward to stand up.

…My right hand.

She reversed the blade in her hand and drove it toward Aigaion's side along a parabolic trajectory.

She had gathered speed, but she had not intended to gather strength. Nevertheless, she heard a sound.

It was the sound of something flexible being sliced through.

She saw Aigaion's right hand fly through the air.

The mass of gravity exploded in midair.

The air moved and wind washed over her.

She found it ticklish how the bottom of her torn clothing whipped in the wind.

She staggered forward and ran clockwise to Aigaion's back. This prevented her from seeing his movements, but she had a way to know what they were.

The flow of air within the blowing wind told her.

His large body threw a backhand her way using his remaining left hand. She could feel that smaller wind blowing directly toward her.

As his arm arrived, she lowered down using her next step on her left leg.

After making sure his powerful arm passed by overhead, she stepped onto her right leg.

She practically stabbed her heel into the ground and used her right hand to throw the blade into the air.

She swung her working right elbow backwards and used the acceleration to rotate clockwise.

She used the momentum of the rotation to fully turn around and she saw Aigaion there.

They were now face to face. She was rotating and he was defenseless after his backhand had missed.

In between them, she saw the sword she had previously thrown.

While maintaining the momentum of her rotation, she grabbed the midair blade with her limply extended left hand.

Aigaion's expression changed when he saw the blade tip.

He smiled.

"That move was a mistake!"

His words made her realize she was moving.

…Does this mean I'm as strong as Tatsumi and the others now?

She did not know, but she did know something.

"I will grow stronger."

She swung the sword in her left hand without gathering any strength in it.

It flew toward his neck and a nice sound rang out.

●

The battle in front of Kurashiki Station was one-sided.

The bombardment from Moira 1st and the other maids prevented the enemy from approaching, but UCAT was not making any clear counterattack or retreat.

The maids' bullets easily pierced through buildings. The impacts had caused a few buildings to collapse and UCAT's movements were severely limited.

Despite seeing no clear counterattack, Moira 1st did not stop firing toward the road.

Her supply of plates was already running low, so she was primarily using the knives and forks she had brought along as well.

Moira 2nd had contacted them via their shared memory to say she had switched the functioning gods of war to a combat program and was on her way to join them.

Only two gods of war remained. The combat program had been created from the data taken in this battle and was made to fight short-term without making any mistakes. To prepare for Moira 2nd's arrival, the maids were firing a few shots to the south of Kurashiki Station. They were firing blind toward the many enemies there, but it would at least slow their advance.

There was also something else Moira 1st needed to target.

A single person stood two hundred meters away in the center of the road running southwest.

The gray-haired old man in a lab coat could hardly be called a soldier.

"They referred to you as Ooshiro, didn't they?"

The old man named Ooshiro stood boldly in the center of the road and held up a camera.

"Ha ha ha! You're no match for me now that I've awoken to the wonders of video!"

She fired on him regardless.

However, he evaded it. He swiftly slid just his hips to the side to avoid the bullet with the smallest possible motion without changing

the height of his center of gravity.

"That was a close one. I almost shook the camera."

One of the maids turned toward her.

"Lady Moira 1st! There's something weird about that old man!"

"I had come to the same conclusion, but we must not let that affect our decisions. *It* may look like *that*, but *it* is the director of UCAT. That must come with a certain level of strength."

"Oh. That serious expression on the head maid is just plain wonderful!"

Moira 1st fired another shot with unparalleled accuracy, but Ooshiro once more twisted his body as little as possible to evade it.

…What a dreadful opponent.

She then heard an odd noise.

The sound of a dry branch breaking came from Ooshiro's lower back.

"Ah."

His small voice of realization brought everyone to a stop. A boy near Ooshiro looked up from among the UCAT soldiers taking cover. He held a giant white Cowling Sword in one hand and spoke in all seriousness.

"Make sure the next one hits."

"Do you really have to give orders to the enemy, Izumo-kun!? And what with my back and all, could you maybe help me?"

"Don't be stupid. If I save you, Chisato'll get mad at me."

"Y-you shouldn't put the blame on Kazami-kun."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't oppose her."

The two of them exchanged a look and laughed, but then Izumo nodded.

"How about you get hit and die? I'll get you a nice tombstone that says 'human trash'."

Ooshiro laughed and turned toward Moira 1st.

"Hey, head maid! Do you mind targeting this young man first!? I can't dodge or even move, so you might as well wait until later for me, right?"

She fell silent and the maids reorganized. They formed a row of 18 gravity acceleration lenses and she threw a plate inside. The lift gave it a tendency to hop, but this was at relatively close range.

“Using the shockwave, we can blow you both away at once!”

They prepared for the incoming attack.

●

Sayama and Shinjou ran around the city.

They were being pursued.

On the other side of the houses that they ran between and hid behind, their scattered comrades indicated their own locations and the locations of the enemies they could see using whistles. A short whistle gave their own location and a long one gave an enemy’s.

The streets of Kurashiki were complicated, but they knew their comrades’ locations, their enemies’ locations, and their own location.

“We can provide quick firing support. Shinjou-kun! Between the houses to the right!”

Shinjou nodded and fired Ex-St between the white-walled houses she heard a long whistle come from. The light was not at its maximum power, but the recoil was enough to knock her feet from the ground.

Sayama caught her back and ran without watching where the light went.

A long, high reverse whistle filled the air from the direction Shinjou had fired. That indicated an enemy had been defeated. They also heard some gunfire suddenly stop.

“Another one of ours was taken out. I think we are taking slightly more damage.”

However, there was something odd about these maids.

“According to the communications officer, whenever one of ours is defeated or surrenders, the maids help heal their injuries.”

“Why?” asked Shinjou as she looked up.

He nodded toward her as the ends of her eyebrows lowered.

“They are not combat models. Their decisions are based on the standards of a maid, so they must want to help once their job of killing is complete. They possess both the will to kill and to save. Quite a strange Gear, don’t you think? Also, none of our injured comrades have returned to the battle. That silence could be out of respect for the maids’ efforts.”

He thought for a moment.

“Or they might not want to ruin the pleasure of having been healed by a maid.”

“That one sounds more likely.”

Shinjou sighed and then frowned when she heard gunfire cut out about two buildings over.

“Sayama-kun, it sounds like someone else was defeated. Why are we taking more damage? I thought you said they aren’t combat models.”

That was a simple matter.

“It is an issue of movement speed, numbers, and weaponry. They were waiting for us and they scattered us once the battle began. Yes, they intentionally scattered us. Someone likely gave them that as a strategy.”

“But…why?”

“Most of us are carrying submachine guns. They can fire quickly and are powerful, but they can of course only attack in a straight line. What happens if an enemy charges in at extreme close range while moving left and right at high speed? Remember, UCAT’s submachine guns weight about five kilos.”

Shinjou thought for a moment as she ran.

“It would be heard to swing your arm to keep up with them.”

“Rather than running, automatons move with small leaps and burst of acceleration from their gravitational control. While scattered, we cannot act as a group to suppress their speed and agility.”

He glanced toward his waist where he carried a ten centimeter charm that functioned as a handheld explosive.

“Doctor Chao handed these out to everyone, but they are useless when we cannot hit with them. Winning while fighting as an individual will not be easy.”

“Is there a way to overcome this?”

“Ending our fixation on firearms, working together with as many others as we can meet up with, and not letting the genre of maids lead us astray.”

“I’m not sure what you mean by that last one, but I can think of one more: a weapon that can fire over a wide area like my Ex-St.”

“The higher ups asked that we destroy as little of Kurashiki as possible even if it is a concept space. …Of course, the other side is

destroying it too now that the battle has begun.” He took a breath. “I do wish we had a lot more weapons. That is my responsibility for accepting this battle on such short notice, but it is true we lack the weaponry needed to match them.”

Shinjou nodded as if hanging her head, but Sayama saw something falling from above.

“Shinjou-kun!”

He tackled her aside and brought Georgius to his back. He carried a knife there as standard equipment and the large combat knife had a 20 cm blade.

He raised the blackened blade overhead and stepped back.

A metallic noise rang from near his left hand and something was lightly deflected.

He saw someone land on the ground at a speed that ignored gravity.

The person lowered down toward the ground a little in front of him.

“Violet-kun.”

“Yes, sir. I was looking for you so that I could be your opponent.”

“Why is that? There are plenty of other enjoyable opponents for you.”

“Lady Moira 1st appointed me as the one to entertain the guest of honor.”

She said “yes, sir” once more and took a stance with gently spread legs as Sayama stepped back. She held a kitchen knife in her right hand and a pot lid in her left.

Noticing her lean forward in preparation to move, Sayama went on his guard.

He then heard Shinjou’s voice to the right. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her aiming Ex-St his way while sitting up after falling to her butt earlier.

“Sayama-kun! Get down!”

But Violet’s decisions and movements outdid Shinjou.

With a snap of the wrist, the automaton threw the pot lid toward Shinjou.

“!”

The pot lid was given speed and rotation with gravitational control and it crashed into Ex-St with a metallic noise before being

intentionally sent into the asphalt. The force of the attack knocked Ex-St upwards from below.

Violet spoke quietly as she ran toward Sayama.

“I was always the one washing dishes and utensils, so this is my specialty.”

Shinjou frowned and cried out as she shot Ex-St, but she could not aim properly.

Nevertheless, she fired.

A clear sound filled the air and a white beam of light let out a roar as it raced across. The chopping beam of light flew in the arc of a punch from down low, so it circled over Violet and Sayama’s heads and struck the building behind them.

However, it did not cause an explosion. All it caused was destruction and the sound of shattering glass.

The building was a mid-sized electronics store with a parking lot in back.

The front entrance had been destroyed.

“…!”

Sayama leaped inside with a back step, but Violet accelerated and reached him in an instant. The eyes behind her glasses contained a smile as she prepared her kitchen knife at the waist.

“Welcome and please come in.”

Sayama gave an expressionless nod in response.

“I see. Thank you for your hard work. …But how about I give you your tip up front?”

He swung his right hand and threw the explosive charm that had been attached to his waist.

He placed the paper in the air between the two of them and spoke.

“Welcome.”

The charm exploded.

●

Gyes ran through the hangar.

Rather than use the stairs up to the hanger deck, she took a single leap up.

There, she saw Miyako sleeping on the hanger deck sofa.

“Typhon!”

The white god of war had begun to walk and it had a definite yellow light in its eyes.

She frantically grabbed the railing.

“Lord Apollo!” she shouted. “Where are you going!?”

And…

“Why are you abandoning Lady Miyako!?”

Typhon gave no answer. It instead walked right up to her.

“…”

It nodded once, turned its back, and continued walking. Amid the rumbling of its footsteps, she attempted to pursue it, but she stopped after taking the first step.

“———”

Miyako’s eyes opened a little and Gyes’s shoulders shook.

“Lady Miyako!”

“Oh, Gyes?”

She frowned, but her eyes regained their focus in an instant and she sat up.

“Where’s Apollo!?”

She looked straight toward the hangar entrance. Beyond it were the white back of the leaving god of war and its six wings.

Seeing that, she opened her mouth.

“———————”

She took a breath.

“Apollo!!”

She moved forward from the sofa. Her knees slipped from the edge and she nearly fell. Gyes supported her, but she was too frantic to notice.

“Wh-what the hell are you doing!?”

She wanted to move toward him and those white wings, so she struggled to break free of Gyes’s support as if swimming. Gyes realized that something had to have happened to her.

“Lady Miyako!”

When she shouted into her ear, Miyako finally turned toward her.

She was crying.

“…”

Gyes saw an expression she had never before seen on a human face. It was not especially lacking in strength, but it seemed to have crumbled and lost all focus. That expression was now looking

directly at her.

"Why?" Miyako took in a breath. "Why did it turn out like this?"

Gyes tried to answer. She was almost embracing Miyako and she tried to use precise decisions to provide the words that would supply her with absolute relief.

However…

…I can't think of anything.

She had not realized her accumulated data and decision-making ability were so undeveloped.

However, the answer arrived from elsewhere. It came from a small figure walking their way from the door to the internal corridor connecting the hanger deck to the living floors.

"I don't know why it turned out like this, Miyako," said Moira 3rd.

While still crying, Miyako took another breath and turned toward Moira 3rd.

"The truth is, Lord Apollo woke up before you. He called my middle sister and had her check."

"Check what?"

"Whether a child was forming within you."

Gyes saw Miyako's expression change from tearful to surprised.

"A kid?"

The collapsed part of her expression regained a bit of strength. That strength came from doubt.

"It can't be confirmed yet," said Moira 3rd. "But my middle sister used some precise gravitational control to fix things in place, so it should be fine. Also, my middle sister had this."

Moira 3rd held out what she had been hiding behind her back.

It was a flower pot.

"She said to give this to the child when it's born. …Lord Apollo was delighted too. He said he wanted you to give it to the child."

There was nothing in the flower pot. It had no seeds or even dirt.

"He said he wanted you to fill it with what can be seen in this world."

Miyako closed her eyes.

A blast of wind could be heard outside as Typhon left.

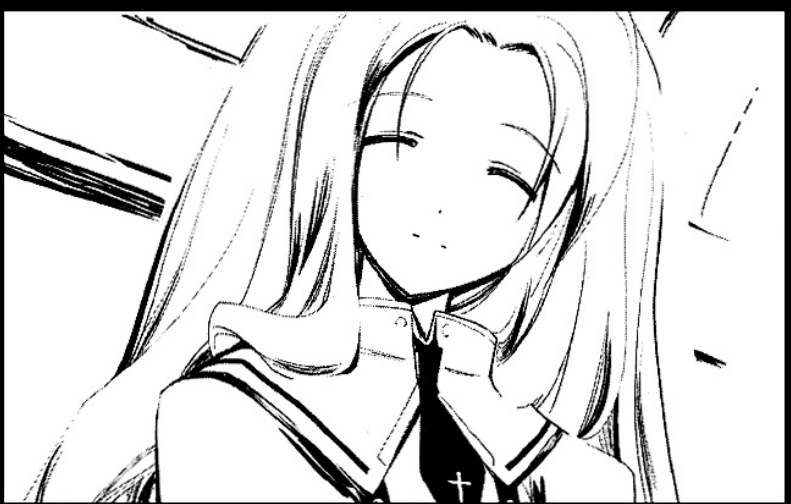
"That bastard made the decision for me. …A husband and wife have equal rights these days, you idiot!"

Her voice trembled, but she still spoke with her eyebrows raised.

“And don’t think a wife isn’t going to want to see her husband’s decision through to the end!”

Chapter 37

“The King’s City”



I have arrived, everyone

●

When Team Leviathan entered the concept space, they had left their main unit in a hospital parking lot.

A single white tent was set up there.

It was their medical tent, but as it was not on the front lines, its primary role was to store medical supplies. Only two people were visible in the cramped area left by all those supplies.

Mikage lay on a cot placed behind the piles of boxes and Sibyl sat next to her.

Mikage sat up on the cot and looked up toward the white cloth of the tent.

Occasional scraping sounds would pass by on the other side of that cloth.

“Those are stray bullets. They are a bit large, so I assume a god of war or something has arrived. We are being protected by gods of war of our own, so we should be fine.”

However, Mikage expressionlessly shook her head to say there was no guarantee of that.

She had found herself here when she had woken up and she assumed it was on Hiba’s instructions, but…

…Why here?

Hiba had often said he would protect her, but now bullets were flying through the air and he was not here.

What did that mean? Before she had passed out, she had found her solution concerning Hiba. She had decided he should live with the others.

In truth, she had felt quite lonely the day before.

…Or is this normal?

Hiba’s mother was alone since his father had died.

Realizing there were others like her made her think being alone was normal.

In that case, she would bear with it.

…Ryuuji-kun needs to live a normal life without calling on my power.

She would bear with it for now and, once he returned, she would ask him to no longer take her to the battlefield. If she no longer went to the battlefield, he could live a much more normal life

without worrying about anything.

She felt that was the right decision, but the thought of it still brought a pain deep in her chest.

That pain caused her to lower her head a little.

Sibyl then gave a smile with the ends of her eyebrows lowered.

“Hiba-sama is protecting you. He is doing so even more than before.”

Still feeling that pain, Mikage turned around and faced Sibyl with a frown.

“…”

She shook her head, but Sibyl did the same.

“Mikage-sama, do you know why Hiba-sama is with the others?”

“Ee-uhs ih’s orahl.”

Because it’s normal.

She mouthed the words, pointed at herself, and shook her head.

…Being with people other than me is normal.

“Perhaps. It is indeed not normal to be so obsessed with you and some might call him a perverted stalker boy. That phrase sums up the current situation fairly well.”

Mikage tilted her head at the term she did not understand, but Sibyl merely nodded.

“But I think being with someone is not the only way to show you care about them.”

Sibyl suddenly grabbed her hand which was already wrapped in bandages.

“You can also leave someone or push them away because you care about them. Much like you are doing now.”

“…”

“He is doing the same. Although you could call it cute how he brought you here to make sure he did more than just distance himself from you.”

“Uht?”

“Yes, cute.” Sibyl’s smile grew and she ignored the stray bullets flying over the tent. “Both of you are. Right now, he has chosen the battlefield and I am sure he can face the battlefield without you now.”

“Hy? Hy uhs ee ite?”

“Why does he fight? Because he knows it will protect you. Before,

he let you monopolize him, but now he is working for everyone. However, he is only doing that because he realized he could not protect you by protecting *only* you."

Sibyl's smile lessened and her voice grew quieter.

"To put it in a bit of an over-the-top way, he is protecting the place in which you live."

"Uh ays ih ihch I ihv?"

"Yes. Do you know the origin of your name?"

She had been told that before.

It was back when she would go to the Hiba Dojo after she had woken up but before she had learned to speak. Her vision had been imperfect and she had only been able to see things vaguely.

One morning, when the moon still remained in the sky, Hiba had pushed her wheelchair to visit his grandfather and the old man had brought them further beyond the open air dojo.

A cracked clearing and a small cabin in the woods had been there.

The cabin had appeared inhabited. They had passed over a narrow dirt floor and reached a small area of tatami mats. Hiba and his grandfather had worked together to sit her there.

"I ememer."

I remember.

Her dim vision had seen a light rising above the mountain ridge that had been visible as shadow.

The subsequent contrast between light and darkness had shown the natural things such as trees, mountains, and rivers as well as the unnatural such as cities.

She remembered being told that was where she had been named Mikage.

She had looked at the young Hiba's face, seen a smile there, and formed the same expression on her own face.

…I wanted to evolve.

She remembered thinking that.

She wrinkled her brow and looked to Sibyl. Sibyl was looking at her slightly lowered head.

"Hiba-sama is in a place where his power is needed."

And…

"He will not ask for your help because that could end up hurting

you, but that is because he cares about you the most."

Hearing that, Mikage opened her mouth.

"Uht."

But.

Upon saying that, she suddenly realized something.

…But what do I want to do?

She wanted to know. Rather than simply thinking she did not know, she wanted to know the answer to that question.

"Ih-ul."

…Why do you know the origin of my name?

Only a few of those closest to her knew that.

As soon as she thought that, she heard cries of surprise from outside.

She wondered what had happened and Sibyl held her in her arms.

A moment later, she heard an explosion and the tent was blown away.

●

Two exchanges were being made in the moonlit sky.

One of beams of light and the other of speed.

On one side was a giant form with four metal wings and several cannons. On the other was a small body with wings of light and a spear.

They were Cottus and Kazami.

Kazami repeatedly flapped her wings while keeping her distance from Cottus.

Cottus could cover a large distance with a single action and his mid-stage acceleration was the most powerful.

On the other hand, Kazami had the greater initial speed and could make tighter turns.

However, the difference in distance covered per action was simply too great. Even when she flapped her wings repeatedly, a single movement of his wings would separate them.

They were currently to the northwest of Kurashiki Station. There was light down below, but it did not come from houses. It came from a large area filled with mansions, towers, the decorative lights on arcades.

"The amusement park. Or is it a theme park?"

Spreading out from the northern entrance of Kurashiki Station was Kurashiki Tivoli Gardens which used a Hans Christian Andersen theme.

Kazami descended toward the illuminated European-style temple in the center.

The clock on the dimly-lit arcade was approaching 9:00 PM, but it would be past 11:00 PM outside the concept space.

…Is that the lag between the creation of the concept space and the power being set up?

She looked to the Ferris wheel to the right as an attack came from the sky.

She flew into the theme park and she glided through the illumination of the central arcade covering the tree-lined path to the entrance.

She moved quickly and the illumination hid her wings of light more than the trees did.

She used her wings and kicked off the brick path to slalom between the trees while looking back and repeatedly firing G-Sp2's cannon. She clicked her tongue when Cottus turned around and evaded from a hundred meters up. She avoided the return fire with a flying step while gliding over the brick path.

She slipped between the trees.

The flat white roof before her was the theme park's exit. She smiled when she noticed the empty mobile organs and European style popcorn stands on either side.

An instant later, she passed between the exit gate and the roof while drawing the pursuing bullets of light.

She flew out front where a wide road extended to the left and right. Beyond the road was the large white building of Kurashiki Station and a parking garage.

The wind was different from in the theme park, she had a wider area to move in, and the theme park's lights felt hot behind her.

It was summer and she noticed the lights of a beer garden on the roof of the station building.

…Come to think of it, Kaku said we needed to go to one of those once I turned twenty. He was talking about one in Tachikawa, though.

There was no real reason to wait, but he could be overly-serious

about the strangest things.

Light flew down from the sky.

The bombardment tore into the roof of the theme park's entrance and smashed the asphalt.

Kazami flapped her wings and moved right as a feint. Her opponent had a machine's decision-making ability, memory, and predictive ability. If she moved in a straight line, he would easily predict her movements, so she intentionally flew along the stone-paved path in front of the theme park instead of the wider road.

She disturbed her normal motions with a skip, moved her wings, and then quickly launched herself toward the train station.

She soared.

A white terrace was located between the theme park and the station. It had a radius of about fifty meters, the center was left open, and it had European style decorations. A three-story clock tower stood in the central courtyard.

Kazami flew up and over the terrace so she could see the green-roofed clock tower.

She then heard a low sound far to the south and saw smoke in the southern sky.

"Did a god of war or something explode back at the headquarters?"

She wanted to believe the medical tent that Sibyl and Mikage were in was unharmed, but she still frowned.

"They're fine."

She told herself she would go back later and she faced forward.

She flew on top of the terrace, nodded while still frowning, and heard a sudden sound. She heard a bell and classical music began playing from the speakers set up in the terrace's central courtyard.

The bell indicated nine o'clock in the concept space.

At the same time, the clock tower began to move. The clock portion at the top split open and something came out.

"A puppet show?"

A show modeled after Andersen's fairy tales was set up within the clock tower. The puppets were set up in all four directions and each side represented a different story.

The four stories slowly rotated to music.

"Ah."

Kazami realized it was distracting her, so she quickly looked up.

However…

“Viewing allowed.”

Cottus stopped firing and came to a stop in the sky overhead.

Kazami smiled bitterly. She heard the sounds of attacks beyond the station and saw black smoke rising in the southern sky.

“It’s fine. I don’t think this is the end for me, so someday I’ll come back to see it with the person most important to me. I’ll watch this wonderfully enjoyable mechanical kingdom and its puppet show with the sounds of a bell in the background.”

“Understood.”

Cottus moved through the sky above the theme park. He turned backwards and aimed the cannons toward her.

Meanwhile, she moved slowly into the sky without moving away from him.

They both slowly rotated with Kazami below and Cottus above.

Cottus nodded as the music behind them ended and the clock tower closed.

The end of the sound acted as their cue.

“…!”

Kazami took action.

●

Kazami raced through the air.

She ascended while moving in a shallow arc to reach Cottus’s right side.

However, Cottus predicted it.

He first held her off by firing his many cannons toward her and then turned to the right. His turn kept her in range as she ascended and evaded rightward into the sky.

As he rotated his heavy body to the right, he tried to fire a second volley along her upward path, but she took her own action in that moment.

“That isn’t gonna cut it!”

Her new action exceeded Cottus’s predictions.

She suddenly changed her course to ascend directly toward him instead of to his right. This brought her directly into the hail of cannon fire flying her way.

She was directly below him and she could see him turned to the right on the other side of the barrage of light.

His weight prevented him from moving right away, so she used this chance and oriented herself vertically toward the light pouring from the heavens.

"…!"

She kicked off empty air and flew.

Her flapping wings sent her in a straight line directly up. The barrage resembled arrows of light, but she had a rudder to navigate through them.

"G-Sp2!"

The tip of the spear closed and became a blade once more. She used the flow of the wind it sliced through to adjust her trajectory.

And she flew.

She moved her wings to accelerate, accelerate, and accelerate even more. After three consecutive bursts of acceleration, she added on another.

She charged into the center of the barrage in an instant.

Cottus's cannons were positioned symmetrically on either side. By placing herself in the center, she could evade simply by altering her trajectory up and down, so that was precisely what she did.

She pressed herself down on the spear to avoid the first thick beam of light and slipped just above the second without lowering her upwards speed in the slightest.

She expected the third shot to target her face, but it instead targeted the shoulder. It was fortunate she preferred to dress light and therefore had not worn shoulder armor.

…If I'd been wearing it, it would've caught on that blast and I would've been killed.

She accepted that thought positively and continued slipping through the light.

"This feels great!"

She had just about made it out, but one final blast was still on its way.

Cottus was facing to the side, but he had fired with a right-side secondary cannon to finish her off.

Sensing it would hit, Kazami did not hesitate.

She flapped her wings to send her straight forward and she

jammed G-Sp2 into the light.

It all happened in an instant. The light shattered with a great noise of destruction and she felt intense recoil, but…

"Go!"

The intensity of her wings won out. Light scattered as if she had broken through a wall of water and she continued on into the sky.

"I made it through!"

Her shout was met by the sensation of cool air.

…Ah.

The battle was not over, but her vision still turned to the night sky when she broke through the barrage.

The moon and the stars floated in that sky and she thought to herself while looking to the constellations.

…The images of the gods are watching over the people with the moon in the center.

She had reached the empty sky, but she realized one fact.

"Cottus is gone!?"

An instant later, she acted on reflex. She aimed G-Sp2 toward her feet and did not hesitate.

"G-Sp2! Stage Two!"

G-Sp2 made the indicated transformation and she fired the cannon as if stabbing it into the air beneath her.

With a scorching sound, the white light flew forcefully downwards.

"That's where you are, isn't it!?"

Cottus was indeed down below where she had sent the light and her shout.

…He used the barrage to hide his movements as he turned toward me and dropped into my blind spot.

Such a heavy god of war was defenseless after firing or while moving, so after firing the final shot at her before, he had chosen to move as quickly as he could to evade. While continuing to rotate to the right, he had used gravity to drop down below.

If she had let the surprise of his disappearance take over, he would undoubtedly have finished rotating and fired from below. There was only one reason she had not let that happen.

…Experience!

That thought was accompanied by the clear sound of the white

strike hitting the center of Cottus's chest.

The blue chest armor was destroyed and the spreading pressure also destroyed the surrounding armor and main cannons. It looked like a meteor had hit him.

He fell to the ground as if he had been thrown down and that brought him toward a certain structure.

"The Ferris wheel!"

Kazami shouted and flapped her wings to secure a second shot.

Cottus was going to collide with the Ferris wheel that was much larger than him.

However, an odd sensation came over Kazami a moment later.

Everything in her vision rotated while Cottus remained in the very center.

She had been looking at the ground and the Ferris wheel, but for some reason she was now looking toward the sky and the moon.

"Eh?"

Something struck her back and it felt like a cold pillar.

She turned around and found a wheel made from giant white pillars.

It was the Ferris wheel.

"Eh!?"

The answer to her confusion brought a new question.

…Why did Cottus and I switch places?

"Did you use your gravitational control to rotate space!?"

Cottus's gravitational control was powerful enough to keep a god of war as massive as him in flight, so he had used it to rotate the space they occupied by 180 degrees. His gravitational control was not precise enough to grab an individual, but he did not need to.

"Spatial rotation possible."

She looked up toward the voice and saw Cottus in the sky. All of his armor was spread out and the shimmering of heat rose from within.

"Gravitational control at maximum power required."

But in exchange…

"Final attack. Single volley."

That announcement of an all-or-nothing shootout caused Kazami to panic. She was currently an excellent target for a volley, so she needed to right herself and kick off the Ferris wheel pillar.

But before she could, Cottus held out his hand. He had secondary cannons in his hands, stomach, and shoulders.

Light gathered in them and they shot power straight down toward her.

“Victory assured!”

●

The sound of a bell filled the city.

The clock tower’s nine o’clock reverberation shook the uninhabited city.

That sound was joined by gunfire and explosions in various places.

“Last one!”

Mechanical noises and the clashing of weapons came from Susahito Custom.

The noises came from the Achi Shrine side of the road leading from the train station. The last of the green enemy gods of war had just had its torso sliced in two. One of Hiba’s two swords had already broken and this was his first strike with the second sword he had switched to.

However, he instinctually looked to the sky after defeating that enemy.

…Is something coming?

He heard an odd, deep sound. It was the sound of the wind created by the movement of some giant object.

He moved to take the rifle from his back and fix it to the hard point on his right arm, but the object suddenly landed before he could.

“…!”

It flew to the ground about two hundred meters south on the same road.

A white god of war landed with such force that it seemed to collide with the ground.

It was Typhon.

In the center of Hiba’s vision, Typhon was ejecting shimmering heat from the armor on its shoulders and waist.

He also saw a god of war move toward Typhon from the right.

It was a UCAT god of war with black and white armor and it had likely walked this far once the 3rd-Gear gods of war had been dealt

with.

The god of war fired its submachine gun and charged forward with its thrusters fully open.

“———!”

But it was soon proven that the charge was meaningless.

Sparks scattered at only a few dozen centimeters in front of the white god of war. The flying bullets had been deflected with pressure-resistant barriers made with pinpoint targeted gravitational control.

The white god of war did not even take a defensive stance.

The UCAT god of war must have realized the gun was useless because it threw away the weapon and drew its sword.

It clashed with Typhon with the sword prepared at its waist.

“———————”

In the instant Hiba expected them to collide, Typhon raised its right hand.

The palm struck the black and white god of war’s sword head-on.

“!”

And it broke.

The sword could be heard shattering as it seemed to be sucked in and compressed by the white metal palm.

Typhon then thrust that same right hand forward. Despite the UCAT god of war’s momentum, Typhon’s single hand caught it by the armor of its neck.

“…!”

And the black and white god of war was casually thrown overhead.

That was all it took to send it flying through the air.

It flew, rotated, and disappeared beyond the shopping district behind them.

Finally, the spectacular sound of a destroyed building came from beyond that shopping district.

Typhon did not even look back toward its enemy.

In the center of Hiba’s vision, Typhon stared into the city. Smoke was rising here and there, explosions rang through the air, and the sounds of gunfire and clashing weapons filled the city of Kurashiki.

A silver blade was exposed below the night air and moonlight, but Typhon stabbed it into the asphalt. It placed both hands on the

upturned bottom of the hilt and suddenly let out a shout.

"My family of 3rd-Gear!"

The male voice carried throughout the Kurashiki sky that still contained the reverberation of the bell.

"3rd-Gear's king is watching you. Fight to your heart's content!"

●

Moira 1st prepared to fire a plate at Izumo and Ooshiro, but she stopped when she heard a sudden voice.

She frantically turned her head toward the Achi Shrine to listen.

"Can you hear me, Low-Gear and those supporting them!? And can you hear me, those who hold a grudge against us!?"

Moira 1st looked down the road, but the voice's owner was around a corner and out of sight.

However, she could still hear the voice.

"I have prepared all of 3rd-Gear's forces here."

"Eh?" said one of the maids when she heard that. "But we did this without Lord Apollo's permission."

…*Silence.*

Moira 1st sent out a shared memory and continued listening.

"Here are the maids created to look after humans, the guardians created to protect 3rd-Gear, and the massive weapons created to crush our more pitiful enemies and to match the dragons. They stand on this battlefield along with the will to use their might to dominate over all others!"

The maids listened to Apollo's words.

"I find this battlefield to be comfortable. No matter what the automatons might say, it does not come from their own wills. This is what my will once desired. I present to you the chance to cleanse it all! Now, cleanse that which cannot be left in this world and cleanse my own life!"

They heard his voice.

"The bell indicating 3rd-Gear's ending has rung! If you will use this battle to invite us in as a new family, then try it, weakest Gear!! If you can show us the happiness of making a family out of the people and weapons we have created, I will accept that you have surpassed us! We are an army of machines that do not seek understanding and know not of retreat! Do not think an iron will and

steel flesh can be so easily controlled and brought to submission!”

And…

“I, King Apollo of 3rd-Gear, will accept the result of this battle as the result of the Leviathan Road!!”

Moira 1st closed her eyes when she heard that.

She finally nodded and faced forward.

In the distance, a boy and an old man who was not moving his back stood on the road.

The boy rested a giant white Cowling Sword on his shoulder and nodded once.

“You’ve got a great king. …From what I’d heard, I was imagining someone a lot more pathetic.”

“Yes, he has become truly great. Until now, he pretended to not give this any thought and seemed to hate his father and 3rd-Gear.”

She smiled.

“According to the records I have access to, no one would make a more fitting king for 3rd-Gear.”

“I see.” The boy nodded again and smiled. “If your king’s watching, we’ve got no choice. Let’s both show what we can do.”

“Of course.”

Moira 1st nodded, brought two plates together, and held them up.

She realized this would be her final shot as she forcefully swung her arm and shouted out.

“Loading the bullet!”

●

Apollo turned to the right of the road.

He pulled the sword from the ground and held up his right hand.

He saw his opponent among the orange streetlights.

It was a black god of war.

He had not seen this god of war for a long time. It had actually been sixty years, but to him, it had been only five.

“Hey,” said Apollo. “How about a rematch? I never actually lost to that Susahito god of war.”

“Yes, I know. My grandfather used Susamikado to kill you.”

“He arrived to take back Rhea’s daughter and hid at Cronus’s place. Rhea’s daughter had been turned into an automaton and your grandfather made his appearance when she had been handed over

to my father's duplicate."

He remembered that time quite well. Whenever he had tried to remember it before, Artemis had taken over, but he could do it now. His mind felt clear now that he had combined with the machine.

…Miyako.

It was thanks to her that he was able to remain himself for this long, so he was thankful.

"I was the one that crushed that god of war in front of my father. That is what I mean when I refer to a rematch."

The black god of war nodded and held its sword to the right.

…That is the same stance as back then. No, this one is situated a little lower.

"How nostalgic. Although the noisy crying of Rhea's daughter is missing now."

Hearing that, the black god of war froze in place. After a moment, it spoke.

"Do you know the name of…Rhea's daughter?

"No, my father forbade it. He said it was a name filled with the weakness of Low-Gear. I also never asked because I was afraid of growing even slightly attached to her." A tone of self-deprecation came from the mechanical mouth. "I assume it's a good name."

"It is."

"Ha ha. From what I hear, she's become important to you. …In that case, I'll make you a promise. If I have a child, I'll give it a good name as well."

Miyako will choose well there, he thought as he walked forward.

He moved toward the black god of war and slowly raised his sword.

"Now, it is time we fought."

Chapter 38

“Shadow of Light”

What is held overhead?
What is hidden?
And what envelops everything?

●

A maid walked through a dimly-lit electronics store.

She was Violet and she pushed her cracked glasses up her nose to look around.

“Where are you?”

She received no answer.

She had lost sight of her opponent upon entering the building. He had thrown some kind of thin explosive at her and she had gravitationally sealed off the explosion to prevent any damage to herself. She had diverted the explosion outward, but some of the pressure had leaked through.

Her scarf and the bottom of her apron had been torn apart. She wondered if Aigaion would be angry because he was in charge of acquiring their clothing, but she also wondered if Miyako would be worried.

Apollo’s words weighed on her mind.

She determined this was a problem, but she did not let it show on her face.

She had never guessed that she was the only one to never damage her hands while washing and she had certainly never expected to be chosen as the hand-to-hand combat leader for that reason.

…Master Aigaion, did it not actually matter who you chose?

While wondering that, Violet turned the corner on the washing machine aisle located next to the electric fans.

They were all good washing machines, but the maids had repaired the one in the 3rd-Gear base again and again over the years. The machine itself had grown quite attached to them, so they had no intention of replacing it.

“Some other time.”

If she moved to a new workplace or had some free time, she would have a chance to interact with them.

Unfortunately, machines required fuel to move as living creatures.

“But Low-Gear’s fuel is primarily supplied through a strange cord.”

The external cable on the floor concerned her. In 3rd-Gear’s base, she only ever saw that on the stand used to swap out fuel

sources. The automatons themselves used philosopher's stone fuel to remain active for hundreds of years. She tilted her head because the exposed cable seemed like an exposed organ.

Suddenly, the store filled with light.

The surrounding black box-shaped video display devices lit up, the switched-on fans began to blow, and some kind of recorded music began to play from somewhere.

"…"

She understood that someone had activated the store and she could predict that this was somehow dangerous.

However, she was mostly delighted that the machines around her had begun to move.

They all felt like friends and allies to her.

She nodded and stepped out into the central and widest aisle with her hands on her hips.

"Please come out. We can settle this like the others are doing."

She then heard a voice. It belonged to the Team Leviathan leader named Sayama.

"So the machines here really are alive?"

"If I said no, I would not be an automaton."

"I see," said the voice down the aisle.

A shadow moved in the light at the far end of the aisle. The boy's pale shadow appeared on the wall there.

"Then I would like to make a deal with you over by the entrance."

Violet saw that Sayama held a knife at his chest in his left hand and he also held a small green electric fan in his right arm.

"Don't tell me…"

"Ha ha ha. I am sure you can tell what this means. It is a cliché line, but it must be a first for a machine like you. This is what one says at a time like this: I have taken a hostage. Do as you are told and surrender."

"Isn't it usually the one who took the hostage who is told to surrender?"

"Listen. This is an extreme situation. Nitpicky questions will lead to death."

He pressed the knife against the fan.

Violet's head shrank back as she imagined the sensation of a knife against her throat.

…What should I do?

She lightly held the large kitchen knife in her hand.

“P-please wait a moment.”

“I will not wait. A festival is underway outside and I am Japanese, the people who most fear being late to a fad. Listen, I will count to ten. One, ten. Oh, dear. It seems I already finished. What will you do!?”

“Wh-what will I do?”

Her mind fell into confusion. At this rate, she would be unable to make a proper decision, so she tried to think of a way to deal with it.

…But I don’t understand what he’s saying.

For the moment, she decided to deal with it by ignoring him and first thinking about the current situation.

She then gasped in realization and pointed at him.

“I just realized it, but that’s useless! That fan isn’t alive, is it!?”

“Do not tell me you think it is not alive. Unfortunately, it is just as alive as you are.”

Sayama stepped out from the aisle to reveal the external cable on the back of the fan extending along the floor and behind the display of fans. However, that was not enough to know for sure, so Violet raised her eyebrows.

“Prove that the fan is alive.”

As she spoke, Sayama hit the switch.

The fan blades instantly began to rotate.

It was alive.

That fact caused her to gasp again. That machine was a precious life in this concept space.

“Look.” He nodded with a serious expression. “This is the IAI fan named Cheerful. It can be operated via voice recognition and the shape of the blades has been altered so speaking into it raises your voice by an octave to make it pointlessly cheerful. Now, as a member of its family, what do you think of this situation?”

With the knife still pressed to the fan, he switched it from low to normal, normal to high, and then high to very high.

“Do you understand now?” he said in his wavering and high-pitched voice. “What if I add in a shaking of the head? Like this.”

“P-please stop being so cruel!”

Violet watched on as the fan’s white head moved back and forth

as if in protest.

"Ha ha ha!" laughed Sayama. "This may be a one-sided misunderstanding, but a position of superiority is a wonderful thing. If you care about this child's life, surrender to me and do something to benefit me."

Violet very nearly gave in.

In that case, she thought. *How about I find that girl who fired on us earlier and take her as a hostage?*

But Sayama suddenly looked at her. His expressionless gaze turned her way.

…Oh?

He had supposedly been talking to her this entire time, so why was he turning toward her?

…Was he not actually looking at me this entire time?

He then spoke the rest of her thoughts.

"Violet-kun? Why have you been reacting as if speaking with me?"

"…"

Dumbfounded, she lowered the hand holding her knife and slowly turned around.

She saw the show area at the store's entrance. As it was summer, some large fans were placed there and an especially large industrial fan was turned her way and slowly rotating its blades.

"That is the large fan named Manly that is the parent product of Cheerful here. It is operated via voice recognition and it uses tornado-level wind to lower one's voice by three octaves to make it manlier. Now, what do you say, Manly?"

Violet listened to Sayama speak.

"If you do something to benefit me, I will…oh, I know. I will release this child and thank you by providing a noiseless power source that should be even more comfortable. A high-purity UCAT battery should do the trick."

Manly answered him with a great gust of wind.

"!"

Before she could react, Violet was blown away by the wind.

The balancer required to distinguish up from down did not work fast enough to use her gravitational control. Before she could even think that it was due to being a non-combat model, she crashed butt-first into a pile of cardboard boxes spread out to take inventory.

The empty boxes cushioned her fall and she tried to get up.

"Ah…no…"

Her butt had fallen between two boxes and using her arms and legs to keep herself from falling further was the most she could do.

She then saw several men and women in white and black armored uniforms run into the store's entrance.

Sayama approached them while holding the fan.

"Prepare a battery and a transformer! There should be some in the car electronics section in the back! This is a living armory and a den of their allies, so we should use this as our base as we take control of the other areas!"

Violet watched through her cracked glasses as they all shouted their agreement.

…They just don't give up.

Sayama turned around and she saw a slight smile on his face.

"Listen," he said with Baku on his head. "After this battle is over, why not drop by Kanda? I am sure you will find people who have knowledge you want and want the knowledge you have."

He looked at the knife in her hand.

"And after that, I would like to try your cooking."

Without even nodding, she dropped the knife from her hand.

He grabbed her right hand, pulled, and lifted her up.

"Ah."

Before she could even resist, he had rescued her from the boxes and placed her over his shoulder.

"Everyone!" he shouted.

A black-haired girl walked up next to him and gave a bitter smile.

"3rd-Gear's king has already given his answer, so it is our time to make an announcement."

He took in a breath, raised his left hand, and walked forward into the center of those waiting for him.

"Everyone! Through this battle, we will acquire a steel toy box! And know this, everyone! Even if they are large and fearsome, a toy is nothing but a toy! If they wish to be human, reach out a hand to remove them from their box!"

But…

"If they instead cry and insist they are dolls, act as a villain and crush them! And we of Low-Gear will teach a lesson to the fools who

think of toys as human! We love waste. We leave behind the moment of death. We find a way to view all that can be lost as human. We who have received the sun god's answer wish to spend this night dancing, playing, attacking, and defeating those moonlit dolls! And once those Coppélia have been knocked straight and continue dancing, they can sing and become human! And to ensure it happens…go ahead!!"

He took a breath, lowered Violet near the entrance, and looked her directly in the eye.

"Where is your answer, everyone!?"

"Testament!"

All the surrounding people and all the enemies in the city spoke at once.

Amid the many responding voices, Violet looked at Sayama and the others in front of her and muttered quietly with small movements of her lips.

"Yes, sir."

●

Among the cries of "testament", Cottus's cannon fire descended from the night sky.

The light produced in the shadowy sky struck the Ferris wheel.

The structure could not withstand it.

A roaring vibration came from the Ferris wheel as the light exploded.

The central support pillar was pierced through and the Ferris wheel was left floating in the air.

A moment later, countless lights stabbed into it as if securing it in midair.

First four, then six, and suddenly twenty. This final attack used all of his secondary cannons.

The barrage of stabbing light easily pierced through the Ferris wheel and out the back.

The solid light finally demonstrated its power upon striking the ground.

It produced multiple explosions of heat.

With a clear noise, the explosions of light each grew to several meters across, linked together, and became giant bubbles of light.

“———!”

They finally burst. The shockwave from the explosions of light blew into the sky as a surging blast of air.

The Ferris wheel was located above the blast and was thus blown away and utterly destroyed in the process.

Both the narrow and thick support pillars broke like twigs and flew through the air. The balloon-shaped gondolas lost their direction and were thrown into the sky. The pillars that remained connected bent from the blast. A few broke and a few were torn from their connectors to join the other fragments.

The main support pillar holding up the entire structure broke at the base with only the amount stabbed deep underground remaining.

The shockwave that bounced back from the ground further struck the falling Ferris wheel from below.

The giant circular structure made of steel bars jumped up into the sky.

It scattered like a child tossing sandbox sand into the air. What had once been a Ferris wheel scattered throughout the night sky and did not return.

A giant blue form floated in the sky as the fragments washed over him.

It was Cottus.

The belt-shaped sight devices on his face emitted light as he scanned all of the fragments.

“Odds of enemy annihilation: high.”

The enemy was not within the fragments. The light from his eyes tightened and formed three eyes for three-dimensional viewing.

His eyes were viewing the new hole in the ground. His secondary cannons were large enough to annihilate his enemy with a direct hit, but he wanted to be sure.

“Reconfirming.”

Light raced through his eyes once more, but the enemy was nowhere to be found. All he saw were the fragments and wreckage scattered about, so he nodded.

“Victory confirmed.”

However…

“That’s right.”

A sudden voice came from an unexpected direction: above.

"!"

Cottus went on his guard and turned his sense of hearing outside the fragments and wreckage. He thought about the possibility of the enemy quickly moving outside the range of the wreckage and then charging back in.

But he determined it was impossible. The enemy's mobility was not that great.

Nevertheless…

"What are you doing?"

The voice came from quite nearby. It was in front of his forehead and therefore right in front of his eyes.

Cottus then saw one of the Ferris wheel gondolas fall from the sky in front of him.

A girl was inside. She opened the door with her legs crossed.

"Normally, the guy opens the door."

Her eyebrows rose in a smile and the wings were gone from her back. Even so, she walked forward and stepped out into the air as if taking a flight of stairs down.

"Now, then. I thought I was done for, but then I realized your scan wouldn't reach me in here."

She stood on his shoulder and lightly held up the spear which already had light residing inside it.

Strength gathered in her eyes and the tip of the spear.

"Reversal confirmed. Testament?"

"…!"

Cottus let out a voiceless shout. He could no longer fire, but he reached out a hand to grab her. He had a single reason for doing this.

"Victory necessary! Requested… Will delight master!"

"Yes, but I already have an escort! I don't need your hand."

Kazami's eyebrows rose in a bitter expression as she ignored the approaching hand and aimed G-Sp2 toward Cottus's chest armor.

"…!"

She fired repeated shots into him at point blank range.

●

A shot was fired in front of Kurashiki Station.

The bullet that sent the asphalt ground spraying to the left and right was a plate. The maids lined up in the station roundabout had fired it and the head maid at the back of the line shouted out.

“This hammer of punishment is administered in the name of machines!”

The bullet flew toward a boy holding a large Cowling Sword. If it hit, nothing at all would remain. If he evaded….

“We have given it a spin so it will strike your main unit far behind you!!”

The shout of warning from two hundred meters away caused the boy to move.

He grabbed the Cowling Sword with both hands and held it to the right. He squeezed the grip, lowered and twisted his hips, placed his left leg out toward the maids, and smiled.

“Honestly. Didn’t Aigaion tell you?”

He raised the sword.

“My current hobby is winning prizes at the batting center!!”

The automatons watched as he swung the large white sword.

A clear sound range out along with…

“Clang!”

With that voiced sound effect, the “baseball” flew.

Their own bullet was returned to them along a low trajectory.

“Izumo hits a powerful one right back at the pitcher!!”

Izumo’s shouted commentary forced the maids to make a hurried decision.

“Lady Moira 1st! It’s a line drive!”

The head maid did not rush. She observed the “baseball” flying toward them with twice the force. She also performed high-speed calculations and gave orders to the different maids via their shared memory.

“Now!”

The maids quickly spun around. With a step and a turn that whipped up the wind, they formed a single column rather than the previous one made up of pairs.

And instead of a straight line, they now formed a U-shape. Instead of forming a gravity ring with another maid, they placed their own hands together to form a smaller gravity lens on their own.

They would receive Izumo’s “baseball” with extreme precision.

“We will return it with even more acceleration!”

It all happened in an instant.

The lift affecting the disk-shaped “baseball” caused it to hop and the maid on the right end of the U-shape caught it.

“!”

But it was not enough. Her left wrist was smashed to pieces, the disk was disturbed for less than a hundredth of an instant, and it threatened to veer off course.

However…

“Sorry about the wait!”

Someone held the maid’s hand and corrected the disk’s entrance angle.

…*Moira 3rd!*

While all the maids looked surprised and Moira 3rd gave a smile in return, the bullet approached the end of the U-shape. At the very end of the shape was Moira 1st.

Moira 3rd spun around and took Moira 1st’s prepared hands.

“Big sister!”

“Yes!”

The eldest and youngest Moira formed a gravity ring together and the disk-shaped bullet flew in from behind them.

“Fire!”

Moira 1st and 3rd brought their vertically spread arms together to close in on the center of the gravity ring. This would build pressure in the gravity ring until it burst. That would then accelerate and fire the bullet as a mass of gravity.

And that was what happened.

With the sound of a paper bag bursting, the shattered gravity pieces were enough to create an explosion of steam.

The white smoke exploded from the back of the gravity bullet that contained an airborne plate in the center.

“Carry out our job!”

Moira 1st and 3rd appeared from within the flying steam.

Both their arms had been destroyed.

Their hands were cracked and a few of the wires that acted as the tendons in their wrists had snapped.

However, strength remained in their eyes as they watched the bullet leave.

Their gaze also fell on the boy who was the target of their power.

●

Meanwhile, Izumo lightly rotated and swung Cowling Sword V-Sw.

He no longer hesitated. He raised the sword and simply had to swing it back to strike the coming attack.

However…

“V-Sw, let’s show them some respect! If we’re having this much fun, you can manage it. Stage 3!”

He raised his eyebrows as he shouted and V-Sw transformed in his hands. The Stage 2 thrusters opened and the thruster covers closed once more, but they closed on the front instead of the back.

“I will endure.”

With that note on the console, V-Sw’s cowling extended forward to form a giant cannon.

Izumo held the targeting console and the grip sticking out from the base of the hilt.

The white and black indicators on the console both stopped at 20% output.

“We’ll fire at 20% so we don’t destroy Kurashiki!”

He fired.

“!”

The light that burst from the end of V-Sw was so overwhelming that it reached the scale of a weather phenomenon.

Its color was a fusion of white and black and it sounded like surging light.

It quickly grew to thirty meters across and extended about one hundred meters out. The white and black light ate into the road, swallowed up the air, and destroyed the surrounding buildings as if drawing them in.

However, it did not end at destruction.

“6th-Gear’s concept is reincarnation! Destruction leads to rebirth! Rebirth leads to destruction!”

Just as he said, everything that was torn into and destroyed reverted to its basic components and rose in a spray.

The asphalt became crystals of stone and rivers of resin, the air became pure wind, the buildings become geysers of sandstone and

spraying glass.

It all burst into the air.

At the base of it all, Izumo looked to the end of it all. He saw the light he had fired knock away the gravity bullet the maids had fired and he saw the gravity come apart and vanish into the world.

“Homerun!”

Izumo swung up the light of reincarnation to use the scattering gravity and wind to strike the plate.

The band of light was instantly released into the sky.

The light looked less like lightning and more like a pillar several dozen meters across jutting up into the night sky.

As the reincarnation pillar rose, it produced a rumbling and wind that blew away the clouds which had formed in the concept space sky.

However, Izumo was watching the destination of the bullet he had hit back.

It first hopped gently upwards.

“Keep rising and go out of the park!!”

He shouted despite not being able to hear his own voice.

However, the bullet’s hop was too weak. It was going to crash into the group of maids at chest height. Ooshiro began shouting toward the maids when he noticed, but Izumo could not hear him. He doubted it was anything worth hearing.

…What look would Chisato give me if I had to take responsibility for this?

But he saw something charge in front of the maids and into the path of V-Sw’s light and noise.

It was a new maid. She had short blonde hair, she was tall, and she was expressionless.

“!”

The bullet struck.

●

Moira 1st cried out into the roaring noise when the maid appeared.

“Moira 2nd!”

But Moira 2nd had already charged forward and could no longer be seen. All Moira 1st saw was the white explosion of steam.

The sound of the impact reverberated clearly between the buildings and wind rushed through, but the obscuring steam would not clear up.

"…"

The maids lowered the ends of their eyebrows as they silently watched.

Finally, something fell from the sky where the pillar of light grew weaker.

The object made a hard clunk when it landed on the asphalt.

"Is that…the plate, big sister?"

The plate rotated in a circle and finally split into its original two pieces.

At the same time, the steam began to clear thanks to a strong and forceful wind blowing in between the buildings.

Moira 1st visually checked on her sister in the clearing steam.

The maids all let out small gasps and smiled.

However, their expressions quickly vanished as if they had melted from their faces.

This was due to a certain part of Moira 2nd whose back was to them.

"Her arms…"

They were completely gone.

She was still in the same pose as when she had leaped in from the side and landed after a midair cartwheel. Her left leg was lowered down a bit and her right leg was shifted to the right. Her arms were gone, but it seemed she had brought her hands together and held them out to the side at chest height.

Her clothes were torn and her exposed legs had deep cracks.

"…"

But she was moving. She slowly stood up which caused creaking and trembling in her body.

She kept her back to Moira 1st and 3rd, but that was because she was facing the one who was more important than her own sisters: their guest.

"Sir."

Her voice reverberated down the clearing street and she lowered one knee in greeting.

"Are you satisfied?"

The answer to her question was located down the road. The boy who stood in the center of the road lowered the sword that had finally contained its light. A smile appeared on the corners of his mouth in the remaining wind.

“Yes, thanks.”

Moira 2nd tilted her head forward in a bow.

In that instant, Moira 1st ran loudly forward and embraced her sister from behind. After bowing, that sister had collapsed.

Even with that support, the wires in the back of Moira 2nd’s knees snapped and her legs crumbled beneath her.

However, she smiled as she was supported. The end of only one of her eyebrows lowered as she looked to her older sister.

“A guest…a guest thanked me for the first time…”

Moira 1st nodded, adjusted her grip on her sister, and lowered her hips to sit on the road.

She looked up and found Moira 3rd standing next to her. The other maids were there as well.

One of the maids opened her mouth and sang the song Miyako had taught them.

“———————”

As that song filled the air, the distant people in white and black armored uniforms walked toward them.

They all scratched their heads awkwardly and looked away, but they still walked forward while humming the same song.

●

The moon floated in the night sky.

The sky was divided into a distorted diamond shape. That division was made by the torn cloth of a tent.

The crushed tent’s supports had collapsed, but the piles of medical supplies inside were just barely supporting the roof in their place.

Two people lay collapsed in the darkness there while surrounded by a great din of gunfire and other noises.

One of them was Mikage who lay face up on the side of a cot.

The other was Sibyl who lay collapsed on top of Mikage to protect her. Sibyl gave a small tremble.

“…”

And she moved without speaking a word. The light vanished and only the moonlight slipping in through the roof of the short tent illuminated her as she slowly got up.

Below her, Mikage watched her movements. Paper boxes could be heard collapsing from above her right arm and left leg and Mikage realized those should have hit her instead.

“Don’t worry. My injuries will soon heal.”

Sibyl smiled below her disheveled hair and Mikage sat up.

“Hy?”

…Why did she protect me?

Sibyl did not answer her question.

Mikage did not like the silence, so she moved. She took Sibyl’s hand to get an answer. She grabbed on like a child and would not let go.

The hand she grabbed in the moonlight was the right arm that had been crushed below the boxes. Unlike with Mikage, it was a human arm. She had seen that at the beach. And as a human, Sibyl was soft and would be hurt.

Mikage realized Sibyl needed to be healed. Before insisting on an answer, she had to provide medical treatment for this proof that she had been protected.

“——————”

She then saw something familiar there.

The cloth of the sleeve to Sibyl’s armored uniform was torn and her skin was visible in the moonlight.

It was indeed human skin and a human silhouette, but something else was visible too: swollen red skin that looked like lines appearing on the surface.

“It shows up when I am nervous. Yes, it is a slightly different pattern from the artificial tendons beneath your skin, Mikage-sama. For me, the details are less defined, but that makes it more durable.”

Mikage listened to those words which contained a hint of a smile.

“Do you understand what I really am?

“Uh oll?”

A doll?

As soon as she asked, Mikage realized it was a careless question, but she still received a reply.

“Yes.” Sibyl nodded. “I am indeed a doll. And one made in 3rd-Gear. However…”

The following words did not take the form of a voice.

They were thoughts.

…Can you hear my shared memory?

Mikage trembled. The shared memory of 3rd-Gear’s automatons was only shared between the same models.

…So why can I hear this!?

“Yes.” Sibyl nodded again. “Lord Cronus created me. I was the prototype for an automaton that would evolve into a human. In other words, for you.”

“…”

“While still a doll, I was sent to Low-Gear before the final battle and I went to sleep after helping create Susahito. I believed in Low-Gear’s victory and did not think I would need to do anything more. But two years ago, G-Sp and V-Sw were being transported to Okutama in preparation for the Leviathan Road…”

…And they were attacked. Chisato-sama saved me when the emergency woke me.

“I am honored to meet you, Mikage-sama. I could view you as a younger sister or as a daughter.” She gave a full smile. “You were born from the past of 3rd-Gear and given a doll’s body, but you still managed to become someone who can honestly say they care about the person they care about most. That pleases me.”

She took Mikage’s hand.

“Take my hand and take me from here, Mikage-sama.”

“I ah’t…”

I can’t…

She trailed off before saying she could not walk. She suddenly let down her guard and her thoughts leaked out.

The thoughts formed words. Everything she had wanted to say but could not, everything she had decided not to say, and everything she had kept from Hiba and his family all leaked out to Sibyl as thoughts.

“…Yu.”

She took in a breath and an actual voice escaped her lips for the first time.

“Yuui-un.”

The name of the person she wanted to be there was accompanied by tears.

Beyond those tears, Sibyl merely nodded. She did not pull on her hand.

“It will be all right. It may be irresponsible of me to say it, but it will be all right. After all, the battlefield is always only a step away. …And where is it your heart wants to take you?”

…Let me tell you one thing.

“An unhesitating and powerful desire leads to evolution. So as proof of your lack of hesitation, pull on my hand. Be strong. Even if you have doubts or take a break, always remain strong and continue forward.”

She took a breath.

“That way you can stand alongside Hiba-sama and the others as one of those guiding the battlefield.”

●

Typhon fought Susahito Custom while listening to the singing coming from the station.

The two gods of war clashed swords on one road of the nearly empty city.

The battle had begun with a few ultra-long distance shots from Susahito Custom’s sniper rifle.

While Typhon had evaded the two bullets, Susahito Custom had thrown aside the gun and advanced with sword in hand.

From there, it had been nothing but swordfighting.

The clashing of swords entered the song-filled air as if providing a ringing performance of their own.

The two gods of war used their feet to step toward each other, used their wings to advance even faster, and rotated their bodies around.

Wind burst out as the white and black collided.

When the white god of war flew into the sky, the black one raced along the ground.

When the white one launched an attack, the black one evaded. When the black one attacked, the white one caught it on its sword. The mechanical sounds and creaking of metal travelled along the road as they spun at full speed and came at each other again.

Susahito Custom moved in a zigzag pattern while running along the fairly wide road.

Typhon cut down the roadside trees which somewhat dulled the speed of its sword.

Susahito Custom targeted that dulled speed and threw a sword strike while circling around from the road side.

As the gliding blade tore up the asphalt, Typhon used four of its wings to fly. It used its great power to circle above the other god of war in an instant.

It used the remaining two wings for a rapid dive to attack Susahito Custom from midair.

However, Susahito Custom angled two wings horizontally and swung them to the right like baseball bats. Its giant black body began to spin and rotate.

Metallic noises rushed out and the mutual pursuit at extreme close range would not end.

A single sound was produced at the center of the motion of flowing steel.

It was Typhon's laughter.

"Ha ha."

Apollo spoke with joy in his voice.

"It's been a long time since I fought like this!"

Apollo knew what movements could only be accomplished within a battle. His body had learned them and absorbed them as knowledge. He stood on the leading edge of the techniques gained in his family's history.

...What a foolish king.

As he moved, he thought of Miyako. When he had awoken in the bed before her, why had he been unable to choose to wrap his arms around her shoulders?

He could have simply embraced her and laughed without thinking of the consequences.

...That's right. I don't need to think about 3rd-Gear. I only need to think about myself in the present!

"Why?" asked Apollo.

...Why am I doing this?

He moved, spun, produced collisions of strength, and attempted to find the answer in the results of his actions.

The sounds of metal rang loudly and Susahito Custom shouted while making a wide rotation.

"Why!?"

He also picked up speed.

"Why are you fighting us!?"

"Because I want to." Apollo nodded. "I too was once passionate like you."

He pursued Susahito Custom.

"It's been a long while since that cooled." He used his wings to accelerate. "But ever since, I haven't had this feeling that no one can do things the way I can or that I just need to do this one thing and I'll be satisfied."

"But you don't have to do this."

He understood what the boy meant, but he also found his thinking to be naïve.

…Even so, he's a good boy.

Rhea's daughter was missing out by not seeing him fight.

…What about Miyako? I left her behind and she was crying at the end there.

What a waste.

…I'm such a fool.

He had decided this was what he desired and that it was best for her and the others, so he had made her cry.

He was no different from his father, his sister, or the others.

"Ahh."

He felt like he finally understood why all of them had made those decisions back in their world.

Even Miyako would have boarded Typhon without telling him if he had remained asleep.

…That's just how it is.

Typhon accelerated and caught up to Susahito Custom.

"You are the same too, aren't you?"

The boy had chosen to not bring the one most important to him.

He was the same.

Apollo then thought about Miyako, the child that would be born, and the automatons and Low-Gear people who would likely surround that child when the time came.

…Will they be the same too?

And…

…If possible, I hope they can be a little more honest.

His mechanical face could not form a smile, bitter or otherwise. With his expression hidden by steel, Apollo ran alongside Susahito Custom on the sidewalk. The wind created by the two gods of war destroyed the lines of shop windows and the buildings themselves.

Apollo used his wings and exchanged sword strikes with Susahito Custom as they ran along the asphalt.

He thought about the battle by way of a certain person.

…Miyako.

It did not matter if the child looked like him, but he also hoped it would.

He could not set a bad example. No matter his thoughts now, 3rd-Gear had once tried to destroy the other worlds and had treated people as tools to do so.

"It is time to cleanse that," roared Apollo. "The past crimes and mistakes of 3rd-Gear will be cleansed by me, not by the dolls!"

That was how he could be satisfied in himself.

"That will be my greatest happiness and it can only be done by me, the one who remains from that era!!"

●

Typhon took action while running.

It leaned toward the right sidewalk that Susahito Custom ran along and threw a powerful sword strike in a straight line.

Susahito Custom used the roadside trees to obstruct Typhon's sword. The white sword cut through the trees, but its momentum dropped somewhat. It was only a bit and it barely made any difference.

However, it was enough to make an opening.

In that instant, Susahito Custom's feet tore into the sidewalk tiles as it came to a stop.

The black god of war forcibly slipped underneath the slowed sword and let loose its own blade.

The black blade sliced through the wind and toward Typhon's stomach.

However, Susahito Custom noticed that Typhon had not finished moving.

Typhon's empty left hand grabbed something floating in the air.

It was a tree that had flown into the air after being cut through.

"…!"

Typhon used the momentum of its glide to jab the tree like a stake.

The cut end of the tree acted as a counter as Susahito Custom attempted to attack with its sword.

The tree struck in the center of the chest.

With a short, dull sound, Typhon continued swinging the tree stake.

The god of war's great strength pushed Susahito Custom and sent it flying. The way Susahito Custom spread its wings to the side to keep them from being hurt and the way it fell on the sidewalk waist-first showed that Hiba was still in control.

But Typhon was already on its way.

It let go of the tree, rotated to the side, and glided toward the other god of war.

It used its wings to turn around instantly and it prepared the sword in both hands.

It would swing the sword horizontally to sever everything from Susahito Custom's chest and up.

The attack arrived, but in that instant, Susahito Custom had a weapon prepared without getting back up.

The weapon was not its sword.

It was the sniper rifle that it had abandoned on the ground earlier.

"You saved me the trouble of going over to get it!"

Susahito Custom aimed as Typhon approached and it pulled the trigger of this counter attack.

A gunshot filled the air.

●

Apollo saw the bullet in his vision that was united with the machine's.

From the front, it looked like a fat wedge.

…So this is the end.

It came too quickly, he thought. *This confrontation spanning sixty years has ended with one win and one loss.*

But he then heard an odd noise.

It sounded like a cry.

“——————————”

Also, it was coming from his own mouth.

…It can’t be.

Before he could think further, he tried to stop it.

He tried to stop himself. He tried to stop the other person inside himself.

He tried to stop Artemis.

Chapter 39

“Light of Shadow”

What is it that glows?
What is it that reveals?
And what is it that releases it all?

●

A voice filled the road.

It was a mechanical roar.

Sayama ran out into the road and came to a stop while holding a fan and a battery.

The white and black gods of war were facing each other while turned to the side. From his perspective, the white was to the right and the black to the left.

The situation between them was simple.

The black one was crouched low and had just fired a sniper rifle at the white one. That was all.

However, something changed. The cry from the white one drowned out even the gunshot of the large gun the black one had fired.

Nevertheless, the bullet reached the white one in an instant as if opposing that shout.

Or it should have.

Sayama saw the white god of war suddenly appear behind the black one.

The white one's cry was already over and it was already swinging down its sword from overhead.

…It cut and abbreviated the time!

To avoid its death, it had used its own concept in the instant it was attacked. That was 3rd-Gear's concept of time that was controlled by Apollo and Artemis.

As Typhon's eyes glowed a pale blue, it swung the sword toward Susahito Custom's back.

"!"

The movement gave no time to evade, but Susahito Custom still moved.

It had predicted Typhon's action, so it leaned forward and flew ahead by flapping its wings on either side.

Even so, Typhon caught up. It stepped forward and the sword struck Susahito Custom on the waist. It was a perfectly horizontal strike.

Shinjou gasped where she stood next to Sayama.

Her eyebrows rose and her eyes opened wide.

“Sayama-kun! Ryuuji-kun and Typhon!”

“Stop speaking with nothing but nouns, Shinjou-kun. There is nothing to worry about. The Hiba boy is evolving into someone who can fight.”

He saw Susahito Custom’s upper body collapse down and the black armor over its stomach open.

Below, a boy hovered in midair. It was Hiba who had already left the cockpit.

“This is thanks to a certain idiot teaching him the fear of being struck by an attack.”

Hiba kicked off the overhang of the stomach armor and flew through the air so he would not be crushed beneath his own god of war.

●

Hiba curled up in the air.

He bent his back in an arc and he fell to the asphalt below while ensuring that arc was oriented down.

He landed, bounced, rolled four times to escape the impact, extended his arms and legs, and used the momentum of his roll to stand up.

He then threw his body forward, landed on his hands, twisted his waist, and entered a cartwheel.

He landed as if stabbing into the ground, but he dealt with the remaining momentum by bending his waist, lowering down, and letting his feet skid along.

He turned around and saw the black god of war being smashed to pieces.

This was his first time to see his own craft destroyed. Naturally, it was also his first time to have the enemy win.

He took a breath and found himself unable to stand properly after the shock of the roll and rotation. Strength returned with each breath he took, but he was still a long way off from 100%.

However, the victor sought further victory.

Typhon stepped forward on a direct path for him.

The white god of war easily crushed the wreckage of the black one underfoot and as it approached from only ten meters away.

“——————!”

It let out a cry while looking up to the sky and Hiba still could not stand properly.

He saw Sayama and Shinjou walk up next to him, but Shinjou's cannon was not yet ready to use.

…Damn.

Typhon spread the wings on its back.

That produced eight cannons.

It had chosen a surefire attack of homing projectiles rather than its sword.

It fired and thirty two beams of light flew into the night sky like fireworks. The beams were all solid, but they curved into a descent.

Hiba tried to stand up and leap backwards.

He did not think it was useless. He wanted to try anything that had a chance of saving him.

…This is a lot like 3rd-Gear's will-power.

As he thought that, the light arrived.

"!"

He gulped, but then a giant form appeared in front of him.

It was the red god of war belonging to Gyes. A woman in a red suit and a woman in a white outfit stood on its shoulders.

Gyes shouted toward Hiba.

"I'm leaving this to you, descendant of Hiba! Give the king the resolution he needs!"

At the same time, the woman in white raised her voice while still facing Typhon.

"Stand back, Artemis! You aren't the one that should be fighting here!"

Gyes's god of war prepared its six swords against the descending light.

However, all of the swords were destroyed. The initial strike produced a clear sound and cracks from the blades, the next strike caused them to audibly shatter, and the remaining projectiles shot through Gyes's god of war with more sounds of destruction.

Like smashed ice, the barrage caused the red craft to break apart and fly in every direction.

The impacts of light caused an explosion which sent those on its shoulders into the air.

●

Gyes took Miyako's hand in midair.

Simply holding onto that hand and eliminating Miyako's momentum took all of her gravitational control. Sending the god of war out here and preparing a gravity barrier to defend against the final projectiles of light had lowered her current output.

…Is this the end for me?

She predicted her landing point based on her parabolic trajectory. She would drop Miyako on a nearby building roof, but the recoil would send her crashing to the ground. She would hit on the shoulder and the impact would likely break her neck and smash her head.

Suddenly, a new motion reached her.

Miyako shoved her away using the hand she held.

"…!?"

As she flew face up through the air, Miyako smiled.

Gyes could no longer reach her. Her mind raced yet she could not find an answer.

"Lady Miyako!"

"You idiot, why are you looking so panicked now? You were smiling just a moment ago."

Miyako's voice filled the air.

"You can't plan to die. You have to be like me and assume you'll get out of this somehow or another."

There was no way for that to happen. Gyes had been pushed toward a roof, but Miyako was falling toward the road.

The boy they had protected was down there, but she was falling from around a dozen meters up. That was not something he could stop.

"Lady Miyako!"

●

Hiba heard three sounds.

One was Gyes's god of war being destroyed.

Another was Typhon's footsteps as it approached after causing that destruction.

The last was the shout of an automaton.

“Lady Miyako!”

Hiba knew who that was. It was the person falling from above.

She was a woman wearing a white outfit and she would eventually fall within his grasp. However, he could not save her and Sayama and Shinjou would not make it in time as they ran up the road.

…What should I do?

That thought was immediately followed by Sayama’s voice.

“Hiba boy! Do not hesitate to use the power given to you! You have the right to do so now!”

As soon that shout entered his ears, he felt something placed on his shoulders from behind.

終わりのクロニクル

They were hands and he knew that sensation well.

“It can’t be…”

He looked up and to the back and saw a familiar girl standing with the moonlit night sky behind her.

The tall girl had blonde hair.

It was Mikage.

He saw her cane fallen to the ground beside her. Her legs were shaking, but she was still standing on them.

About five meters behind her was a jeep driven by a gray-haired automaton.

A gray-haired man with a cane sat in the passenger seat.

“I’m only repaying Ryuuichi-san for what I owed him, so don’t thank me.”

The jeep would not help anyone from that point on.

Mikage then opened her mouth.

“I ill ight, Ryuui-un.”

Hiba gave a resolute nod when he heard her high-pitched voice for the first time, heard her wishing to fight, and heard her calling his name.

He looked overhead at the one he had to save, spread his arms, and let out a shout with a smile.

“Susamikado!!”

●

Just as Mikage spread her arms behind him, a pitch black body frame appeared above Hiba. It combined with the drivers, artificial muscles, and the frames for the limbs and then it enveloped his and Mikage’s bodies.

As it enveloped him, he combined with it. The sensation of becoming the machine and growing close to her felt comfortable and ticklish to him.

The entire body was built up in an instant, but what happened next was different from usual.

The armor plates for the shoulders, waist, and chest were not constructed as normal.

…More are being added!?

Extra parts appeared from thin air and attached around the drivers, artificial muscles, legs, and waist.

He realized what this meant.

…Mikage-san has evolved.

Susamikado could now walk on its own and protect itself, so the equipment and parts prepared for that purpose had been released.

After they all attached, he moved.

He tried swinging the arm, but even that motion was clearly stronger, faster, and more accurate than before.

He felt it was as if he had come to understand Mikage.

His quickened vision and reflexes easily grasped Miyako's location as she fell.

"…"

Susamikado quickly caught her.

He eliminated some of the shock and momentum of the fall by twisting his wrist, but he noticed Miyako had still passed out.

He brought her toward the jeep behind him and placed her on the hood.

"Let's go, Ryuuji-kun."

"Right," he said with a nod.

Typhon's eyes were still a pale blue as it approached.

…Do I need a way to overcome that time elimination technique?

Regardless, it was obvious what he had to do, so he spoke clearly.

"Let's go settle this with their king and cleanse the impurity along with him."

●

There was a large empty area in the amusement park.

The Ferris wheel had been there, but it was now a shallow crater about one hundred meters across.

Three people stood in the center.

One was a giant blue god of war with most of its armor destroyed. Another was a large man with his right arm missing.

The small figure approaching them was a short old man.

The large man's muffled voice spoke to the old man.

"You are Hiba Ryuutetsu, aren't you?"

"That's right. …And you're two of the Hekatonkheires, I take it."

Ryuutetsu walked toward them as they created pale reflections of the moonlight and the amusement park's lights.

"You two were taken out pretty spectacularly, Cottus, Aigaion."

“No excuse,” replied Cottus.

Ryuutetsu saw a line on Aigaion’s neck.

“You’re bleeding pretty badly there. Are you okay?”

“No, I’m done for,” readily answered Aigaion with a slightly muffled voice. “My neck connector was severed. I’m holding it in place with my gravitational control, but it won’t last long. I came here because I saw Cottus, but this is my limit. I am only watching on while not getting in the way of the others.”

“Who did that to you?”

“The Army. You’ve heard about them, haven’t you? Their leader is a man named Hajji from 9th-Gear. I was defeated by a girl named Mikoku who seems to be his daughter or something.”

Ryuutetsu frowned, which made Aigaion smile and stand up.

Ryuutetsu took a quick step back on the soft ground.

“Oh? Are you gonna fight? You want a rematch after sixty years?”

“It can’t be a rematch when we’ve never fought before. …We didn’t make it in time back then.”

“Then why did you stand?”

Cottus stood up as well.

“Philosopher’s stone reading.”

“I don’t know what it is, but there is an odd philosopher’s stone reading at the very top of the concept space. A large one. It arrived a while back and it has been circling up there as if waiting for something.”

“Intercept.”

“Yes. I don’t know how it will turn out, but that is our duty.”

Cottus lowered his hand and Aigaion jumped onto it while holding his head.

“Hiba Ryuutetsu, however this Leviathan Road might end, can you promise me one thing?”

“What’s that?”

“There is a greengrocer named Dragon Grocer in the Kurashiki Station shopping area. Send a replacement worker there. The owner has a bad back, so he needs some help.”

“Just go yourself,” replied Ryuutetsu.

Cottus’s shoulders trembled slightly and Aigaion’s smile grew.

“I’m counting on you.”

With that, the blue giant flew into the sky. The gravitational

control did not even leave any wind as the giant blue form became a shadow, became a speck, and finally vanished among the stars.

Ryuutetsu looked up toward them and finally clicked his tongue.

“What’s with them?” he began. “Now I’m gonna feel lonely here.”

●

Cottus and Aigaion rose rapidly into the night sky and the nighttime city spread out below them.

“Look, Cottus! That’s where I worked.”

“Specific location uncertain.”

“Look more closely.”

The city below was separated out by the circle of the concept space. Peaceful lights filled the area outside the circle, but smoke and sparks were still visible within. Sparks also flew on the central street.

“Are those sparks from Lord Apollo?”

“Uncertain.”

“If only it was.”

Aigaion looked straight out and his quickly rising vision could see more than just Okayama. In the distance, he saw Shikoku, Kobe, Osaka, and even the Shimonoseki area.

He saw the distant lights of cities and the shadow of the sea. The circle of Kurashiki was growing hard to see down below.

As they continued up, his breath grew white and they began passing through some thin clouds.

“Cottus, what do you think Gyes will say about us?”

“Impossible to determine.”

“I figured you would say that. We are the same model, after all.”

He nodded.

“Then I guess we’re the same.”

He looked up. The light of the stars had grown quite clear, but there was one light that was clearly not a star.

Aigaion created a mass of gravity in his left hand and shouted toward it.

“Uninvited guest, if you wish to earn an invitation, answer our questions!”

He received wind as an answer. The overpowering wind dropped headfirst toward them.

In an instant, Cottus prepared his living cannons and fired over a wide area.

The light flew into the sky and Aigaion fired his gravity toward the center. The obvious light was spread out to lead their opponent to the gravity in the center.

It was a two-stage coordinated attack.

However, the automatons saw something happen to their bombardment and gravity.

“They vanished!?”

Before they could receive any kind of answer, their plunging enemy arrived.

It was a steel-colored dragon.

As soon as they saw it, the sharp-nosed dragon was right in front of them.

A girl stood on the dragon’s head. The wind that not even the dragon’s gravitational control could eliminate blew at her hair as she held up a sword.

The sword had a certain color.

It was a golden black that was a mixture of the light and gravity the automatons had fired.

“This is the Cowling Sword Mimei. I suppose this is the second time it has been wielded for domination.”

She swung the sword down and the power it produced was clearly greater than what they had produced.

Aigaion shouted toward the light and shadow flying toward him and the sword that had produced it.

“So our coordination wasn’t enough!? If Gyes and her close-quarters combat had been with us, we might have been able to defeat you!”

He smiled.

…It is because we are so poorly made that we are dolls!

…Leaving job to Gyes.

Aigaion nodded when he received Cottus’s thoughts.

In the instant the attack hit, he looked down below.

He could no longer see the city, but the final battle had to be occurring down there.

Typhon was fighting Susamikado.

…A clash between Lord Zeus’s child and the power left by Lord

Cronus.

But he had another thought as well.

…If Lord Cronus, Lord Zeus, and Lord Apollo are the same…

This fight contained an assumed death which was born from a family of malice.

“How will it end?”

His words were swallowed up by the light and shadow and they vanished.

The steel dragon blew all the dust away as it flew on through.

●

Hiba moved quickly along the ground.

He ran toward Typhon and poured his full speed into his second step.

He did not stop.

On the fourth step, he used his wings as if his great speed was not enough for him.

He continued on while noticing and not ignoring Mikage’s injuries or anything else, but also accepting them without lamenting them.

“Let’s go!”

“Right.”

Mikage’s enduring voice sounded reliable to him and he trusted in her thoughts.

Even if there was pain, there would be no misunderstandings or missed meaning.

And so he moved. He had not used the wings since they had been put together, but he did not hesitate to have them explode. He trusted Mikage to handle any slight deviation in the motion.

He moved forward and first collected his weapon along the shortest route.

He launched his body forward and raced through midair as if to crash into Typhon. Before Typhon could turn around, he slipped by its side.

…My sword!

He grabbed the weapon he had set aside when picking up the sniper rifle in Susahito Custom.

Once he grabbed the hilt, he turned around and flew.

Typhon was trying to turn toward him, but it was clearly slow.

That was partially due to him having sped up, but that was not all.

…It's confused by our transformation!

He realized this was the time, so he took action.

He charged toward Typhon's turning side and swung the sword toward it.

He used all his strength and the spray of asphalt and creaking of metal could no longer keep up.

"!"

He drove the sword forward, but Typhon reacted with something other than its speed.

It cut through and abbreviated time.

Nothing remained in the spot Susamikado had attacked.

At the same time, Susamikado was in the spot Typhon was about to attack.

"…!"

He tried to move Susamikado, but at that moment, Hiba saw something in his sped-up vision.

It was Sayama.

The boy stood on the sidewalk down the road and Baku was looking toward Hiba and waving its hands from the boy's head.

With that as the sign, the past demanded a moment of his time in order to break through everything.

●

Sayama was inside a giant temple.

Everything was gigantic in that white space. Most of it was empty space, the ceiling could only be seen as dim darkness, and the supporting columns looked like high-rise buildings.

The sky was visible past the columns, but that sky was filled with darkness. More temples and land were visible beyond that sky, but they were all situated on floating continents.

…So this is 3rd-Gear.

He also saw a few objects in front of him.

They were gods of war.

The closest one was a pale blue. It resembled Typhon and held a sword.

Past it was a gray one standing at the top of some giant steps.

That was Zeus's god of war.

They were looking Sayama's way, so they had to be looking at something behind him.

…What is there?

It was a person and a god of war.

A short man in a military uniform stood before a fallen black god of war and he had blood flowing from his chest. His breathing was rough, but he looked straight up at his opponent with the one eye not covered by a bandage.

He was Hiba Ryuutetsu.

Something resembling a coffin lay next to him and his god of war. It was covered in glass and a girl lay inside.

"——————"

She was crying out. She produced no voice, she shed no tears, and her eyes were not focused. She simply looked afraid of everything.

That was Mikage. Her body was that of an automaton and there was no order to her movements as she sobbed.

The gray god of war facing him spoke.

"We will soon enter your Gear with Typhon as our flagcraft. We can produce more children using Rhea's daughter there, but the humans of Low-Gear may be able to help. …You should be honored."

Sayama saw the pale blue god of war's shoulders tremble a bit at that, but it was Ryuutetsu who spoke back.

"Are you stupid? Do you not understand the situation here? Cronus created another god of war besides that Typhon you've got safely tucked away. It's-…"

"I am aware of that. I also know it is sealed inside a concept space belonging to that girl. Cronus gave her a concept space and a god of war, and then he sealed Keravnos inside when it should have been given to Typhon."

However…

"That girl is still a baby. She can do nothing but cry futilely, so how can you be so sure she is on your side?"

"You don't get it? That's why you're only third rate!"

Ryuutetsu turned toward Mikage just as the gray god of war waved a hand toward the pale blue one.

The pale blue one hesitated for a step but then charged forward.

Three steps were more than enough for a god of war and

Ryuutetsu looked to Mikage in that time.

"Cronus doesn't know what he's doing either."

With his back to the approaching god of war's footsteps, he looked down at Mikage.

"Even with a fake, he should've used the same color as Rhea's."

With that, he removed the bandage wrapped around his right eye.

Sayama saw a single color below the white bandage: red.

It was an eye of that color.

…*He took Rhea's eye to replace his missing right eye.*

He used that eye to look directly in Mikage's black eyes.

In that instant, Mikage stopped her voiceless cry and gasped.

She turned her barely-focused eyes toward Ryuutetsu.

"Mikage."

He spoke such that only she could hear and he cried out even as the god of war footsteps approached.

"That's your name. When your mom saw our world, she was looking at you with this eye and she gave you that name. So…you should remember it."

He took in a breath and bared his teeth in a shout toward Mikage's weak gaze.

"For now, just shout it in your heart! I'm sure some idiot will come along eventually and call your name, so lend me your power now!"

He shouted at the top of his lungs.

"Susamikado!!"

Mikage mimicked the movements of his mouth and it all happened in an instant.

A black giant appeared, breaking the coffin and a column in the process. It enveloped Mikage and then Ryuutetsu.

The coming pale blue giant had already drawn its sword, but Susamikado charged forward.

It evaded the descending sword. Ryuutetsu used that movement to reach out a hand and draw the other sword prepared on the pale blue god of war's shoulder.

"If you had been king, this might've turned out differently. You can ask Cronus and your sister whether you'll live or die."

"What?"

"You don't understand?" Ryuutetsu swung the blade. "Before your

sister was turned into that god of war, it seems she asked something of Cronus. She said she wanted to protect you and make sure you lived if anything happened. …So it's time you were cut down to size for the sake of the next generation."

With a single strike, Susamikado cut the god of war in two.

The sword broke, but Susamikado did not stop moving.

It used two of its wings to fly straight for Zeus.

Space opened up around its right arm and Keravnos took form. Susamikado raised it in midair and the gray god of war drew its sword and let out a roar.

"Don't think this is over!"

"That's the line of a third rate villain! If you're gonna do that, I'll copy a certain insufferable bastard I know!"

It had yet to evolve, so the small Keravnos only fired a single white spear.

When it smashed through the sword and torso of the gray god of war, Ryuutetsu raised his voice.

"We are those who have taken the role of villain! Be destroyed, 3rd-Gear."

Susamikado raced past but then turned around. He saw the gray god of war as it thrust its broken sword upwards as if reaching its hand for the heavens.

It was still alive despite the large hole in its torso.

Susamikado came to a sudden stop on the stone floor and heard several sets of footsteps coming from the temple's lower floor.

"Tch. Reinforcements or maybe automatons. I don't have time to deal with them."

"Are you…going to take me hostage?"

"No, I'm not," replied Ryuutetsu.

However, the footsteps from below grew closer.

"Damn."

As Susamikado prepared, the gray god of war moved. It brought its right hand to its smashed stomach, walked down the stone steps, and approached the pale blue god of war lying in the hall.

"There is a gate in the back. Use it to leave. Take Keravnos with you and destroy this world."

"What about you?" asked Ryuutetsu. "Cronus told me he failed to replicate Zeus's mind."

That meant Zeus had not been sent to the Tartaros and was still inside that gray god of war.

The gray god of war, Zeus, did not reply.

Ryuutetsu clenched his right fist with Susamikado's body.

"Cronus laughed and said he purposefully failed so you couldn't escape to the Tartaros, but that old man's as eccentric as my comrades. He said that because it's what you wanted, didn't he?"

"Why do you think that?"

"Because he also died without going to the Tartaros. He instead became a component for Susamikado. Why?" he asked to Zeus's back. "Why did you pretend to be a fake and try to assist your child?"

But Zeus's reply was not an answer to the question.

"Leave. The maids are coming from below."

That was all the gray god of war said and it did not turn around. It took a slow step as a black liquid and metal parts spilled from its stomach.

"I have something I must do. I cannot allow the royal line to be ended."

"Cronus said the same thing. …Are you going to have him inherit your impurity?"

The gray god of war arrived in front of the pale blue one and crouched down.

"I do not know. That is for them to decide. But…"

It used both arms to pick up the pale blue god of war that had become two pieces.

Black liquid gushed from the hole in its stomach now that nothing was covering it.

However, it stood up and spoke.

"I will not let our king be lost."

He walked toward the approaching footsteps without turning back around.

Sayama heard a sudden rumbling. The shaking of his vision and the air reminded him of a certain fact.

…3rd-Gear became unstable after its floating continents were unbalanced during 9th's invasion.

As the temple began to slowly crumble, the gray god of war continued walking with the pale blue one in its arms. The gray one

looked down at the pale blue one.

"I will not let you die."

It nodded.

"You can no longer make anything but happy decisions."

Hearing that, Susamikado also moved. It spread its four wings and flew into the darkness in the back of the temple.

"Ridiculous."

With that comment spoken through clenched teeth, the past came to its end.

Sayama thought as his vision darkened.

…Will the conclusion be a happy one?

He decided it would.

●

Hiba awoke from the instant of the past.

He had a lot to think about, but there were two facts facing him in the present.

First, there was the danger of Typhon behind him.

And second…

…There's something I must do!

In that past, he had seen others with things they had to do. They had power, they had their own thoughts, and they had things they believed in even as they clashed.

That's right, he thought. *I'll be going there too.*

Typhon had to be performing its attack after cutting through time, so he took action.

Without turning toward Typhon, he rotated his body and swung his sword backwards and up.

His high speed action led to scattering sparks and an impact.

"I stopped it."

But he could not stop his movement.

While turning around, his defensive sword continued on toward Typhon.

However, Typhon once more cut through time and circled around behind him.

But Mikage expanded the armor panels to defend against the position on which she predicted Typhon would attack.

As a metallic noise and more sparks filled the air, Hiba used that

opening for another attack.

And Typhon once more cut through time.

This time, he could make it in time. He used the momentum of his slash to rotate around and made an outward swing of the sword he held in one hand. His attack collided with Typhon's.

"Oh!"

If Typhon cut time again, Mikage could handle the defense.

Their movement, attack, and defense all joined together.

Hiba charged full speed toward Typhon which would use his attack to enter its own attack time.

The opening Hiba had to aim for was the time between Typhon performing the attack and the attack actually hitting.

He focused solely on throwing his own attack into that opening of these nearly point blank range attacks.

It was impossible.

No matter how many attacks he performed, it took time to prepare and swing back his weapon.

However, a certain power assisted him.

"Mikage-san!"

"Right."

Susamikado's armor panels were not mere armor. Mikage moved them around as living armor. Her role was to use the actuators to move the armor around like wings at speeds rivalling Hiba's sword strikes.

If Typhon repeated its attack time again and again, Susamikado would quickly attack and deploy its defenses at the same time.

That was the answer.

If their enemy could cut through time, they simply needed enough speed to interfere with that cutting.

Hiba moved and gave a silent cry from his voice device.

"————!"

He picked up speed.

He moved faster so he could have his opponent cut through time any number of times, be attacked any number of times, and receive damage any number of times.

…And so I can keep fighting for as long as it takes!

He had learned this from his fight with Sayama. There was only one way to rule the fight.

He had to think the fight would not end.

He launched a barrage of sword strikes, quickly rotated his body, predicted where his opponent would be, and left to Mikage what was best left to her. All the while, Susamikado moved about as if dancing.

Suddenly, a song escaped his mouth.

“Silent night, holy night.”

The white god of war roared at the song, but his words continued as if in response.

“God’s Son laughs, o how bright.”

He sang and produced an explosion of speed that accelerated him even further.

The high-speed dance became a barrage of Typhon’s attacks with Susamikado at the center.

Several blurry afterimages of Typhon appeared and then vanished in turn.

This is a dance, realized Hiba. *It probably looks like the white knight taking the black princess’s hand and dancing about her.*

Wherever his moving body and sword went, metallic noises and sparks colored the air.

“Love from your holy lips shines clear.”

Hiba moved.

“As the dawn of salvation draws near.”

His high level concentration caused the surrounding noises to vanish and he gave his five senses over to nothing but the movement around him and his own song.

No, that was not all. Mikage was always nestled up next to him while inside this god of war.

He swiftly sang and moved while feeling that reliable sensation.

Typhon was crying out as it constantly appeared behind him. Its voice was loud, but it had lost the tone of a scream. Hiba had a thought about that cry of Typhon’s.

…Is it angry?

The bringer of death it had finally killed had been revived.

Was he imagining that it seemed to be expressing its hatred of those with a human body?

…No.

That was something he had occasionally sensed in Mikage. He

had wondered if she viewed herself in that way and he himself had thought that way in the past.

But that was only in the past.

…So I'm imagining it. That isn't the case now.

He had no intention of apologizing to Mikage over that because he had the convenient idea that she had surely thought something similar.

"Jesus, Lord, with your birth."

He gave a bitter smile, rotated his body around in the scattering sparks and movement, and looked around.

He saw the city of Kurashiki covered in the lights of night.

…Will I be able to visit this place with Mikage-san once the battle is over?

It seemed she was able to walk now, but would she need someone to support her? If not, he would be sad but, at the same time, happy.

But even as those feelings appeared and disappeared, they were not done yet.

…That's right. We can continue doing that kind of thing from now on.

They would continue on and on to bring everything to and end yet ensure that nothing ended.

And so he desired more speed.

"Mikage-san!"

"Right!"

Within their speed, his footing grew slightly more certain. Mikage had diverted most of the nerves to the drivers.

Hiba further raised his speed.

●

Sayama and Shinjou could no longer follow the movement.

They saw black and white winds clashing and rotating, but…

"Is the black one pushing forward?" asked Shinjou.

Sayama nodded.

The movement of the wind was reversing. The white had been pushing before, but the black was now the one pushing.

The black one had surpassed the white.

Just as Sayama became certain of that, Kazami sighed after walking up to them. She spoke quietly while blankly watching the

scene before them.

“My dad asked why Zeus stopped at sealing Typhon, but I get it now. He must have been leaving it for the next generation that he knew would have improved over his generation. He was leaving it as an assignment.”

“Parents certainly are selfish.”

“So are children,” muttered Kazami as she looked up into the sky. She narrowed her eyes at the moon and stars there. “What a lovely night. …Hey, did you know this?”

“Know what?”

“I remembered while fighting earlier, but the stars in the sky make the shapes of the constellations from Greek mythology. People used to use them as guides at night and as the subjects of stories.”

She gave a bitter smile.

“In that case, the moon and the stars of those constellations are watching over the sun as it races across the earth. And they give no thought to taking the sun king’s place here.”

Those powerful words were followed by a metallic noise on the road.

Susamikado’s movements had completely surpassed the cutting of time.

The sound was that of Typhon making a frantic strike as Susamikado moved forward.

Susamikado’s sword broke. The black blade had been worn down as it was used to defend and it now shattered into dust.

However, Susamikado spread its wings and charged straight forward.

It ran. The black god of war poured all of its strength into its body, lowered down, and ran.

It slipped beneath the sword Typhon swung down and reached out a hand in the middle of that rotation. The black hand grabbed the remaining sword on Typhon’s shoulder.

After drawing the white blade, Susamikado used it to attack while passing by Typhon.

This was a replaying of the events from sixty years before.

This disturbed Typhon’s movements and there was a single reason.

The pale blue light vanished from its eyes.

“Did the replaying of the past lead Artemis to accept her death!?”

But a new light appeared. A yellow light. And the owner of that light nodded toward someone.

“Take a rest. I was always the one that should have protected you.”

After speaking, Typhon brought its sword forward and caught Susamikado’s sword.

“Now, let’s continue our fight!”

●

After gaining control of Typhon, Apollo wished to fight.

He was now at one win and one loss and he had overcome the replaying of the past.

The clashing swords parted and the black god of war took evasive action and moved away.

But Apollo would not let him escape.

“This ends here!”

He gathered strength in his back.

The white god of war’s six wings spread out and fired thirty two homing projectiles with a clear noise.

He watched his greatest firepower head out to settle things with the black god of war.

However, the black god of war turned around and moved forward.

In an instant of swift motion, Susamikado slipped through the barrage.

The blast of the light landing behind it gave it even more acceleration as it arrived.

When it thrust its sword forward with all its strength, Apollo realized something

…You two desire this fight as well!

He answered with his own concept.

He cut away time and flew full force into his attack time.

When he appeared behind the enemy, he found the blast of his own cannon fire.

The explosion of white light caused Typhon’s armor to creak, but it also launched him forward.

He also used the power of his wings to advance toward the back

of the black god of war.

He was going to catch up.

His enemy had accelerated too much to handle attitude control, so he could catch up and defeat that enemy without having to cut away time again.

In that instant, his enemy seemed to abandon the fight.

It forcefully threw its sword into the air overhead.

Needless to say, it would not help defend or act as a decoy.

…What are you doing!?

Apollo then saw his enemy powerfully open its right fist in the air.

●

Without fearing Typhon's approach from behind, Hiba and Mikage cried out in unison.

"Keravnos!!"

With that word, a roar and an impact reached their right arm.

A concept space opened around the arm's exterior and Keravnos's parts appeared while disassembled.

However, its form was different from before. The spear frame portion was not the first thing to be spatially ejected.

"A back connector arm!?"

Floating in the air was a large arm that connected to the back below the wings.

Next, the spear frame portion was ejected, but it was clearly longer than before.

Also, three shock absorbers appeared around the arm, the top of the device, and the front. Next came the claw to lock onto the arm and the rails for firing the spear bullets.

The side guide rails and the upper counter head attached and the counter head was cocked to adjust its position.

A further shock absorber and an acceleration thruster connected to the back and the spear bullets entered inside.

The spear bullets were the main part of Keravnos. They were the half of 3rd-Gear's Concept Core further divided into three spears.

However, the space for the spears to enter was odd. Inside the closing parts were five spots to store spears.

"I'm evolving because I want to become stronger."

Finally, a line of eighteen steel bolts were ejected. With nine on

either side, they each forcefully jabbed into Keravnos to hold it in place. That high-pitched harmony of steel ensured the device would not waver.

It all created a pile driver measuring over six meters in length.

Hiba used that pile driver to gouge into something: the ground.

●

The air resounded with the sound of the earth being struck.

And with that sound, Susamikado forcibly changed its direction while fleeing forward.

It used the recoil of Keravnos to fly up into the sky.

It spread out its limbs and wings to circle around over Typhon's head.

It rotated around to orient itself face up and then used its wings to perform a power dive in front of Typhon.

Its left arm moved to grab the sword it had thrown into the air.

Meanwhile, Typhon read its actions. Susamikado would send a decisive sword strike using all of its weight.

"!"

So Typhon reflexively cut away time.

It appeared in the air above Susamikado as it descended in a power dive. Typhon also spread its limbs and wings to descend. Also, the cannons on its back were already aimed toward the ground and therefore at Susamikado.

But for some reason, Typhon saw the tip of a blade before its eyes.

It was the tip of the sword Susamikado had thrown earlier.

Susamikado had pretended to reach for it but had not actually touched it.

It had all been a feint based on the assumption that Typhon would circle around behind it.

It did not create the end of the battle. It was only a continuation of the battlefield.

"…!"

Typhon reflexively cut away time once more. It moved toward the blind spot of Susamikado's blind spot and Susamikado shouted what that was.

"Its original location!"

●

As he shouted, Hiba saw Typhon appear on the ground in front of him as he fell.

Its cannons were already ready to fire, but that would not do anything about Susamikado's action.

Keravnos fired its three spears.

He fired into the stomach rather than the chest. That was harder to hit from above, but the reactor containing the Concept Core was there. If his aim was even slightly off, he would destroy the cockpit and kill Apollo instantly.

But if he destroyed only the reactor, there might still be a chance.

Typhon fired, but Hiba did not care.

He fired his own attack while leaving everything else in the hands of his speed, the armor, and Mikage's adjustments.

A few of his armor panels could not withstand the damage and broke. That created a small deviation in his actions.

…Dammit!

As he silently swore, he saw a certain light.

It was a pale blue light in the form of a woman and it appeared in front of Typhon's stomach armor.

It was Artemis.

She looked clearly at him, but her crying face changed to a smile and she lightly waved both hands.

Typhon then cut away time.

However, it did not move behind Susamikado this time.

Typhon moved to the front of Keravnos with Artemis still in front of the stomach armor.

In response, Susamikado landed and unhesitatingly fired Keravnos into her.

A metallic roar filled the air, Hiba felt it hit, and the smiling Artemis nodded before scattering.

"…!?"

Hiba wondered what her nod had meant, but it was Mikage's shout that answered him.

"Keravnos and Typhon!"

He looked and saw light rapidly gathering in the spear of light that had stabbed into Typhon.

Keravnos was consuming Typhon's Concept Core.

To support it, the back of Keravnos expanded and received the extra light. It acted like it was a machine originally created to combine the Concept Core into one.

It can't be, thought Hiba.

He then thought about what Sayama had said while preparing for the battle.

…Is this what he meant when he talked about how much I understand Mikage-san?

"Is the destructive weapon of Keravnos following Mikage-san's evolution and evolving into the Tartaros Machina that contains the Tartaros?"

The Concept Core Tartaros had been the cause of 3rd-Gear's destruction and it had now been recombined into one.

…Why did Cronus make this?

He also wondered if Zeus truly had not realized it.

However, there was no way to know.

He gave a groan as the noise and impact continued. Finally, the Tartaros was completely stored inside Keravnos.

In response, Typhon's entire body trembled and something was expelled from its back.

A large cockpit left the white god of war.

The giant white metal block was slowly ejected and it fell to the ground with a loud metallic noise.

Hiba then heard a voice. Among the allies and enemies surrounding them, the blonde head maid spoke up while bringing a hand to her mouth and lowering her eyebrows.

"It can't be… Lady Artemis is recomposing Lord Apollo using the high output of the moment in which the Concept Core is joined together."

Hiba did not entirely understand what that meant, but once her quiet words finished reverberating through the air, a heavy metallic noise appeared before him.

The white god of war named Typhon had fallen to its knees.

…Is this… Is this the end?

He looked up into the sky where the moon and the stars looked down.

Everyone surrounding them then let out cries that expressed the

various thoughts held within them.

●

Amid the shouting, Shinjou watched Keravnos's new form, but she suddenly turned to Sayama.

He was staring at his left hand instead of at Susamikado.

There was a light there and it came from Georgius.

"Again?" she asked.

He nodded and held up Georgius. White light throbbed around the medallion embedded in it.

Wondering if it was all right, she held up her own hand out of curiosity.

Suddenly, Georgius reacted and the light rapidly grew.

"Eh!?"

As everyone else was focused on Susamikado, Georgius's light intensified between her and Sayama.

At the same time, Susamikado's Keravnos let out a roar.

"!?"

It was so sudden that everyone froze in place. As they all watched on, sound rushed from Keravnos's surface.

Something was dented and gouged into its black armor.

…*Writing?*

She could not read the writing, but she understood what it meant.

However, it was not anyone from UCAT who read the writing on Keravnos.

It was a female voice that came from a black-haired woman in white clothes who stood a short distance from everyone else. She stared blankly at the text on Keravnos as Gyes supported her.

"We of 3rd-Gear…" She took a breath. "Vow to become a power that gathers a great number of people along with the wills of the sun king and moon queen!"

Once she finished speaking, her expression changed to a relaxed smile.

As if in response, a single maid stepped toward Typhon. She had short blonde hair and both of her arms had been destroyed, but she still faced Typhon's cockpit which had fallen to the ground.

"Lady Miyako." She turned around and nodded. "Lord Apollo will most likely be fine. Lady Artemis protected him just as she

promised.”

Miyako closed her eyes in a smile and all strength left her body.

Everyone frantically cried out and ran over, but it was not just the UCAT members who did so. A great number of automaton maids did as well. Some ran and some walked, but they all approached.

Amid it all, Shinjou listened to the UCAT members speaking as they walked up from behind.

“Hey, doesn’t this seem wrong if you go by the story?”

She heard a bitter laugh.

“After all, Typhon gave birth to the king and the queen.”

Chapter 40

“Words of the Night Sky”

This is a place of dusk
It is where everything begins and ends
If you look to the sky and ask, the wind will answer

●

Sayama watched as everyone prepared to withdraw.

Georgius was no longer emitting light.

…Did it react to the Concept Core?

He had questions, but he had no way to investigate them. When combined with the documents Tsukuyomi had sent him, he had a lot to think about.

He was currently looking down the street while a short distance from the others. The people formed a ring around Susamikado in the middle of the street and Miyako lay unconscious at the god of war's feet.

The automaton head maid placed a blanket over her.

According to the short-haired automaton who seemed to be the head maid's younger sister, Apollo's pulse could be heard inside the cockpit ejected from Typhon. Also, it sounded more stable than before.

According to the maids' prediction, the output created by Keravnos's Concept Core combining with Typhon's may have been used to recompose Apollo's body. Artemis had remade him using the past experience of recomposing him within Typhon.

…So the princess who could not have children still managed to leave behind someone important to her.

However, it would apparently take time for the recomposition to stabilize. It could happen in another fifty years, after several thousand years, or even tomorrow.

They were loading the cockpit block onto a truck to carry it away. Typhon's wreckage was loaded onto a cargo pallet with a truck connector and it was stopped at the end of the road by the station.

Just as he began to wonder what would happen, Shinjou spoke from his left.

"I wonder what's going to happen."

He turned around and found her with a smile, so he nodded expressionlessly.

He then heard an unfamiliar female voice.

"Yes, what is going to happen?"

And…

"But have you realized that none of this is over yet?"

●

Sayama frowned at the voice.

…I have never heard that voice before.

There was another odd fact about the voice as well: its location.

It came from the direction of the cargo pallet carrying Typhon, but its height was strange.

…The sky?

As he turned, he heard a sound.

It was a quiet whistling of wind.

But despite being quiet, it carried through the air and everyone turned toward it.

A giant form had appeared just a few meters above Typhon and its cargo pallet.

"A mechanical dragon!?" shouted Gyes. "Are you the one Aigaion and Cottus informed me of just before their shared memories cut out!?"

Everyone was looking at a steel-colored mechanical dragon floating in the air and a girl standing on its back.

The girl's black hair whipped in the wind and she wore a giant Japanese sword on her back.

Her sand yellow combat coat waved in the faint wind.

"Do I need to introduce myself?"

"Of course!!"

As Ooshiro crawled forward because of his bad back, he held out a camera.

"Oh, dear." The girl tilted her head down to face the camera. "I am Nagada Tatsumi of the Army."

"Liar!" shouted Susamikado.

Everyone turned toward it as it turned around to face the girl.

Hiba's voice trembled as he continued.

"You're Hiba Miki, aren't you!? Sister!"

But Tatsumi did not reply. Her smile simply deepened as if to say she could not hear him.

Everyone who saw that smile was left speechless and Sayama saw them take a step back.

An excellent smile, he thought while embracing Shinjou from the side because she began to step back as well.

…So she is an enemy.

But Shinjou suddenly tilted her head and frowned.

“Huh?”

“What is it, Shinjou-kun?”

“The Army is rumored to be a mixture of a few different Gears, right?” She drew back her head a little and spoke quietly. “But doesn’t that Tatsumi person’s Cowling Sword look familiar?”

It did. He had seen it earlier that day in the documents Kashima had sent.

“That is the Cowling Sword that Director Tsukuyomi’s late husband left designs for.”

He nodded and looked to Shinjou. She gathered strength in her shoulders and nodded with Ex-St in hand.

They both stepped forward and he expressionlessly began to speak.

“I do not believe we have met. I am Sayama Mikoto of Team Leviathan.”

“Oh, how polite.”

Tatsumi and Sayama exchanged bows and Sayama asked the first question, but it was not directed at Tatsumi.

“Gyes-kun, a question. Who are they? Answer as quickly as possible.”

“They are an organization named the Army. An information broker known as Hajji is their leader. They have gathered the remnants of several Gears and try to invite others to their side. Today is the first time I have seen any of their main force outside of Hajji.”

“Leave it at that, Gyes. This may be my first time to speak with you, but let me say this. …Now that you have lost to Low-Gear are you going to wag your tail and forget everything the Army has done for you?”

“Damn you.”

Gyes glared at Tatsumi, but she ignored it with a shake of the head and turned back to Sayama.

“Listen. 3rd-Gear and the Army have an agreement. If their Concept Core is taken, they will give us Typhon. So I’m sorry, but we’ll be taking it using this mechanical dragon.”

“I see. And what is the mechanical dragon’s name?”

Rather than Tatsumi, it was the dragon that nodded in response.

“I am a mere mechanical dragon and nothing more. As such, I regrettably have no name to give at this point in time.”

“It sounds to me like you actually want to name yourself.”

“Do you dare look down on me!? I made a promise to not name myself as Alex!”

“I see.”

He nodded and Shinjou poked at his side with Ex-St.

“I think we might be able to make friends with him.”

“What are you talking about, Shinjou-kun? I am friends with everyone in the world. With myself above them all, of course.”

He turned back to Tatsumi and did not hesitate to face her smile and gaze.

“I have a question for you, Tatsumi-kun. What if we did not allow you to take Typhon?”

“The fact that Team Leviathan interferes in and breaks agreements made between other Gears will spread.”

“But I thought the Army does not belong to any Gear.”

“Is that how it looks?”

That question silenced Sayama. It was true that they had no proof that the Army did not belong to a specific Gear. If it had begun in Low-Gear, one could even say it belonged to Low-Gear.

Tatsumi laughed at his silence.

“What a clever boy. Interesting too. But it’s time. If I don’t return home and get to sleep, I can’t supervise everyone’s training tomorrow morning. I have low blood pressure after all. Okay, Alex.”

“Tatsumi, why are you using my name when I forbade you to!?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I can be forgetful. …As can you.” She spoke completely casually. “For today, we will take Typhon and leave.”

The mechanical dragon nodded and moved.

It descended in an instant and used its four legs to grab the white god of war that was held down by chains on the left and right.

Despite the extreme weight of the god of war, the mechanical dragon tore the chains apart and easily lifted it.

“Miki!”

“I abandoned that name. I now go by Tatsumi.”

Tatsumi smiled toward Hiba, but that expression vanished for just an instant. When Sayama noticed, he glanced toward the spot she

had looked at in that moment.

A single jeep was parked far beyond the circle of people. Inside it were Sf and two other people.

…Diana and Ooshiro Itaru.

As he thought that, wind blew in from behind. Diana's usual smile was missing and Itaru was the same as always, but they both slowly looked up into the sky.

As if chased by their gazes, the mechanical dragon flew into the sky.

Susamikado tried to follow, but…

"Ryuuji-kun! The Concept Core combination hasn't stabilized yet!!"

Mikage's voice stopped him.

Gyes clenched her teeth because her god of war was still destroyed.

In no time at all, the dragon vanished into the sky and left only wind behind.

Everyone held their breath as they looked into the night sky and saw the moon there.

However, Sayama gave a firm nod, turned toward the others, and lightly raised his hand.

"If they had an agreement, we will respect it. Just like us, our enemy views that sort of process as important. By using the proper process, they are attempting to gain the same justification to their actions as ours."

"You mean…?"

"It is simple, Shinjou-kun. Doing this gives them a certain possibility. They can oppose us, defeat us, justify their own actions, and place our actions on the wrong side of history."

In other words…

"We and the Army will be fighting to place the other's actions on the wrong side of history. That is what this means."

Those words placed a nervous look on everyone's faces. Among them all, Kazami and Izumo nodded.

But one light voice spoke up. It was Ooki's and she clapped her hands.

"Oh, but Sayama-kun. And everyone else too. Doesn't this mean something else as well? The enemy may have taken Typhon, but that

means we know something about what they can use to fight."

There was a slight pause before everyone reacted.

And that delayed reaction was a bitter smile.

"I suppose so," said Izumo as he crossed his arms next to Kazami. "And Team Leviathan now has someone crazily powerful to run errands for us. That certainly is reliable. After all, he's an underclassman who can buy us coffee at supersonic speeds. He's our errand master."

"I will not have Mikage-san summon Susamikado just to go buy things!"

"Then you'll go buy them on your own?" asked Mikage's voice.

Susamikado produced a muffled groan in Hiba's voice.

The slight movement of the black god of war produced bitter laughter from everyone. As their tension left them, they sighed and Sayama looked across them all.

"At any rate, it seems the enemy is terribly insensitive."

He turned toward Miyako who was wrapped in a blanket and held in the arms of the maids. Everyone else followed his gaze.

"Now is the time to be wishing her the best, and yet they had to bring up that agreement. Let us show our own sensitivity by forgetting our job and celebrating this night. And most likely celebrating the new form of 3rd-Gear."

"Yes." The head maid nodded with a smile and looked across the crowd while embracing Miyako. "We will accept you all. Also, we wish to gather and continue on with all of you. After all…"

She looked up into the sky.

The moon floated in that chilly and empty night sky.

Whatever she was thinking, her eyebrows lowered, her eyes narrowed, and she spoke the names of those who had vanished.

"We believe that we will never meet our end."

Final Chapter

“Praise of the Great Heaven”

Carry the words of your praising thoughts
Carry the will of your supporting thoughts
There is one simple thing you must do now

End.

●

The evening summer sky extended above the green mountains.

Scarlet light colored the mountains from a shallow angle and those mountains filled with harsh contrasts of dark and light.

A winding river ran through the shadows and some giant white buildings were located in front of one bend.

They belonged to IAI's Tokyo headquarters.

The scarlet-dyed buildings and the vast grounds of the facility were surrounded by walls and a gate that were also filled with scarlet.

The sun set late that summer evening, so business hours were already over.

A single person passed through the wide main gate: a woman.

Her semi-long black hair was swept back and she awkwardly wore a beige suit.

She was Tsukuyomi Miyako.

She lightly lowered her head toward the guard at the front gate and checked her watch and she left the grounds.

The only sounds were the river running down below and her own heels clacking on the asphalt.

After exiting through the gate, she looked to the bus stop a short distance to the left.

"I guess I'll go home."

She carried a bag over her left shoulder and she brushed a hand through her hair.

There was only one thing on her mind.

…What's going to happen now?

All of the automatons had been taken to Japanese UCAT's western headquarters located underneath IAI's headquarters in Shimane.

After some formalities were dealt with there, they would be allowed to contact the other automatons in Kanda and be scattered within UCAT which possessed the concepts automatons needed.

A strange old man named Ooshiro had told her all that. He had also said they would accept that the Moirai and other automatons had human rights, treat them as a group, and not disassemble or examine any that did not volunteer to do so.

Gyes was especially cooperative and she would apparently be allowed to participate in UCAT in some form.

Her two fellow models had been defeated by the Army, but Moira 1st had said the following:

"She wishes for a master and an organization to serve more than the rest of us because she wants something to support her as she fights."

Gyes could leave the concept spaces and she had said she would visit Miyako's home before long, but Miyako was unsure how that would turn out. *She has a habit of lecturing people,* thought Miyako. When they had parted, she had gotten on Miyako's nerves by insisting on countless things such as giving her child a good name.

…I hope I don't end up more or less having two moms.

She had a feeling that fear would come true.

However, there was a lot she did not know.

The cockpit containing Apollo had apparently been brought to the western headquarters, but she did not know how that would turn out.

She also did not know what those who had fought on that battlefield would do now.

To meet them, she would have to join UCAT and face the battles there.

…And 3rd-Gear's will most likely desires that.

She looked to her left shoulder. An envelope of UCAT documents poked out of the bag there.

"If I use this to join UCAT, it feels like I'm using my parents' connections."

But…

"If I want it and others want it of me…"

Where was it she should go? Who was waiting there?

As she thought, her heart grew a little heavier.

In order to brighten her mood, she turned toward the western sky where the setting sun sank behind the mountains.

She found a fairly bright scarlet there. It was sinking, but she still could not look directly at it without holding out her hand.

…Ahh.

"I want to see him."

The name Apollo appeared in the back of her mind. He was the young man with the same eyes as her and he was the father of the child within her.

…When will that idiot come back?

She did not know. For her sake, Moira 2nd had said “eventually”, but it could be thousands of years in the future.

She might never see him again.

She did not like that thought and she no longer tried to reject how she truly felt.

She looked to the brightness of the sun.

“But the sun and the moon can’t be out at the same time.”

She felt as if her heart had grown even heavier.

She stopped walking and remembered many different things. She remembered the many different meetings and emotions from the past few days.

As she did, she suddenly took a shrill breath.

Her breath caught in her throat and she could not stop the trembling in the corners of her eyes, her lungs, and her shoulders.

Her emotions threatened to spill out.

She looked up in an attempt to contain them. She looked to the evening colors in the heavens above.

…Dammit.

She swore toward that sky, but then she saw something unexpected.

It was the moon.

“…”

A thin white crescent could be seen in the sky that was dyed purple by the sun setting in the west.

She then recalled a certain fact.

“The light of the moon is a reflection of the sun’s light.”

They were sometimes both seen in the evening or morning. And even when the moon could not be seen in the sky, the sun’s light was still reaching it.

“You idiot… You’d better hurry back or we won’t be able to see the moon in the night.”

She forced a smile in only her eyes and she looked back down.

The setting sun to the west and the moon in the heavens illuminated the mountains, the river, and the distant cities. The

shadows of contrast created by that scarlet light looked beautiful to her.

But what about her? Did she illuminate her surroundings like that? Or was she the one illuminated by them?

She suddenly brought her left hand to her stomach and thought about the child.

…What should I name it?

She could not check with him, but he had left this with her. For the time being, at least.

"Evening, dawn, beauty, shadow…or bright."

If she used characters meaning something like that, would their child become a child of 3rd-Gear and Low-Gear?

Or should she think about it differently? She could also give the child a name to make it more honest than them and make it bless many more people than they had.

…But to do that…

She thought about a lot and suddenly reached her left hand for the envelope of UCAT documents sticking out of her bag.

Just as she began to pull out the papers that would determine her destination, a sudden sound of an engine passed by her from behind.

"Ah."

It was the bus from the Akigawa area. It was on its way to Oume and would pass through Ikusabata where her home was.

Before she could even cry out, it arrived at the bus station up ahead.

She began to run and her heels rang loudly.

"…"

But she brought her right hand to her stomach and slowed down.

She began walking calmly and without rushing.

"Hey! Wait up!"

She did not hesitate to raise her voice as she grabbed the bag containing the UCAT envelope and waved it up toward the sky that contained both the setting sun and the moon.

"I'll…"

She shouted.

"I'll be right there!!"

"I have determined it is sure to be enjoyable."

Afterword

The afterword is only two pages again.

I've somehow managed to end Volume 3. This was my first three-parter, but I can only do this thanks to all of you. Thank you very much.

I talked a little about Kurashiki last time, but it really is a nice city. It got destroyed quite a bit here, but it might be fun checking those areas on a map and visiting them.

Anyway, I'm rushing along, but here's the customary chat.

"I'll ask just to fit the pattern, but did you read it?"

"Yes, of course. I never expected Shinjou to see Hiba killed by Apollo, become the blonde-haired large-breasted Super Normal, and then use the Negative Spirit Bomb."

"You didn't read it, did you? And Hiba's Krillin now?"

"No, I really did read it. That boy has a terrible success rate in his fights, doesn't he?"

"It's about the same as your success rate in hitting on girls. More importantly, you got married around the time 3-A was released, didn't you? Congrats."

"Stop simultaneously teasing me and congratulating me in an afterword my wife is going to read!!"

"I see. So wives are reading my books now, are they? This might have entered a genre middle and high school kids will be hesitant to pick up. Maybe I should use 'Popular with Newlywed Wives!' to advertise it. That'd be terrible."

"Stop setting up the joke and giving the punchline on your own. Anyway, I gave a painful story last time, so it's your turn."

"I don't have any painful memories from middle or high school. The day before I graduated from middle school, I was hit by a car while riding my bike. The bike was bent in half, but I was completely unharmed."

"You can't do that. When that happens, you have to almost die and raise a flag with the girl who runs over to you."

"Um, is this guy's wife listening? The idiot is seriously saying this, so I'm gonna make sure to record it."

"Please don't do that! After she read 3-A's afterword, my

household nickname was Tits Checker.”

So this time it’ll be Flag Checker.

Anyway, I edited this while listening to ASKA’s Seiten wo Homeru Nara Yuugure wo Mate. (It puts me in a good mood lyrically as well.)

“Who was it that stood up?”

I also thought about that. Volume 4 is up next, so wait just a bit.

May 2004. A morning in which the rain refuses to let up.

-Kawakami Minoru

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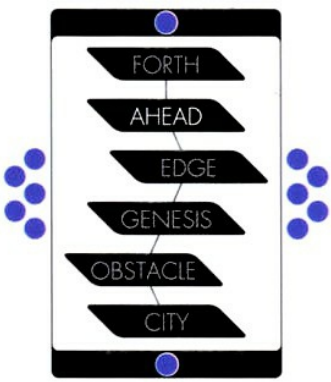

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